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Week of
October 6, 1941

Critics' THEATRE REVIEWS

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†"The Distant City" opened Monday, September 22nd, at the Longacre Theatre.
†"Ghost for Sale" opened Monday, September 29th, at Daly's Theatre.
†"Mr. Big" opened Tuesday, September 30th, at the Lyceum Theatre.
†"Best Foot Forward" opened Wednesday, October 1st, at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre.
†"Ah, Wilderness" opened Thursday, October 2nd, at the Guild Theatre.

THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Critics' Theatre Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

NEW YORK SUN	NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK POST	NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE	NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"	NEW YORK JOURNAL AND AMERICAN

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"Ah, Wilderness"

Reprinted from NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *October 3, 1941*

O'Neill Revival

By RICHARD WATTS, Jr.

SINCE Mr. O'Neill is reluctant to let us see his new play, "The Iceman Cometh," the next best thing is the revival of one of his earlier works. There would be even more reason for gratitude toward the Theater Guild, which offers this new production of "Ah, Wilderness," if the direction were smoother and less dawdling, but even as it is, there is cause for satisfaction over this opportunity to see once more the most winning, if far from the most distinguished, of the works of the First Playwright. For "Ah, Wilderness," despite its lack of the brooding and monumental dramatic sweep of the great O'Neill dramas, it is an extraordinarily sweet and touching comedy that can be loved for its gentle, rueful nostalgia (if you will forgive that overused word) as well as admired for its shrewd and observant picture of life in the year of our innocence, 1906.

• • •

Deprived of the sort of pointed, smooth-flowing direction which so tenuous a comedy requires, "Ah, Wilderness!" maintains its quality, its spirit and its youth with comforting effectiveness. Since it was first produced no longer ago than October 1933, there might seem to be comparatively little reason for it to show any great signs of age, but, although you might sometimes not think it, things do move rapidly in the theater, and plays age with sickening rapidity. But "Ah, Wilderness," which is a comedy with a youthful spirit, continues to exert its spell without too many signs of weakening. Frankly, shamelessly sentimental in its outlook, the play is so honest about it, so engaging and humorous, so quietly, tenderly observing, that it continues to be an enchanting picture of a lost decade, done with rare delicacy and understanding.

• • •

Perhaps the chief news of any production of "Ah, Wilderness" is the quality of the performance in the leading role that George M. Cohan created so notably. The portrait of Nat Miller, the Connecticut small-town newspaper publisher, which Mr. O'Neill drew and Mr. Cohan brought to life on the stage, was done with rare charm, humor and understanding and is one of the most winning to be found in the modern theater. Now the role is in the hands of that fine veteran of stage and screen, Harry Carey, who has just the humorous, quizzical and engagingly homespun qualities which are so necessary to the role. To that extent Mr. Carey is entirely right for the part. There is, however, the inescapable criticism that under his touch Nat Miller becomes rather more an agreeable rancher, who has just dropped in from the West, than a credible New England publisher.

• • •

Of the other players, I should say that Tom Tully, as the alcoholic brother-in-law, is the most successful. Mr. Tully manages to make unhappy Sid Davis, the broken-down newspaper man, a humorous, racy and slightly touching figure and gives him just the quality that the play demands. Miss Ann Shoemaker as the wife and Miss Enid Markey as the old-maid sister are likewise among the helpful members of the cast. As to the younger people, I am not so sure. Perhaps "Beat Foot Forward," the night before, offered such infantile-seeming performers that all other juveniles appear by contrast to be approaching senility, but, anyway, the boys and girls of the cast, with the exception of young Tommy Davis, somehow seem rather too grown-up for their parts. For example, William Prince, as the boy whose problems are the important concern of the play, is an able enough player, but he appears an actor fabricating boyish charm rather than the persuasive possessor of this all-important quality. Nevertheless "Ah, Wilderness" continues to exert a great part of its original attractiveness, even if it does dawdle occasionally.

Reprinted from
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
October 3, 1941

The Miller Family Stands the Test

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

AFTER eight years, *Ah, Wilderness!* still is a very pleasant play, if definitely nothing more. Writing it directly after *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill—in a complete revolution of feeling—turned all the way from the terrible world of an Aeschylus to the homely middle-class world of a Tarkington. It was not, perhaps, so much an anti-climax as a kind of redressing the balance.

Ah, Wilderness! is infused, to be sure, with more sentiment than anything in Tarkington, and with less gentility. Its Willie Baxter has, on the one hand, a soul; and on the other is allowed to come up against the facts of life. Its middle-class family is not only familiar, but also nostalgic. For *Ah, Wilderness!* is after all a period play, set in the time of the author's youth, and representing, with as much wistfulness as laughter, the closer-knit family relationships, the confining bourgeois morality, of that time.

Seventeen-year-old Richard Miller's callow posturings and rebellions, which take him into the presence of a loose woman and then out of it unscathed, account for most of the plot of O'Neill's comedy; but it is the family as a whole—the nice, frustrated maiden aunt, the nice, no-account bachelor uncle, the nice, commonplace mother, the nice, mellow, upstanding father—who give the play its real feeling. There are warmth and decency in these people, and there is also mediocrity. Young Richard, the silliness knocked out of him, will come to be—like his father before him—a good citizen and husband and parent. But in the play's final glow we may tend to forget that along with the silliness went something not so silly: an instinct of protest and aspiration and individuality. That irony remains, whether or not O'Neill intended it.

I did not see the original production, so I can't make comparisons. The present one seems very adequate, though never brilliant and a little slow (the play, of course, is much too long). In George M. Cohan's original role of the father, Harry Carey is likable if nothing more. As Richard, William Prince is likable too. Enid Markey misplays the old maid very effectively, and as the uncle, Tom Tully is excellent.

Critics' THEATRE REVIEWS

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Critics' THEATRE REVIEWS

"Ah, Wilderness"

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, *October 3, 1941*

O'Neill's "Ah, Wilderness!" Is Revived at the Guild Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

IT NO longer matters much, if it ever mattered, what rank "Ah, Wilderness!" eventually achieves among the plays of Eugene O'Neill. Historical critics may count it as only a tragic dramatist's respite, and may even relegate it to a footnote. But in such a season as we have been having, the Theater Guild's revival of this tender comedy comes like an answer to prayer. Here, in case we had forgotten, is the theater worth listening to.

The Guild revived "Ah, Wilderness!" last evening at its own theater, as the first in a series of revivals. It is a fine project, admirably begun. The plays of the series are to be put on at reduced admissions, but there is nothing cut-rate about the present production. The play is there in all its gentle warmth and all its quiet laughter. Written out of affectionate memories, it imparts a glow to all our memories. And it does, as the Guild's program note remarks, affirm again "the tolerance and goodness of the American way of life."

No doubt you remember its story—a story of very young love blossoming in the bosom of a small town family in New England. It pictures a boy full of odds and ends of poetry, romantic and cynical and exalted by turns, and portrays all young men who wrote poetry at 19. O'Neill saw him through adult eyes and was amused, tenderly. And he saw the members of the family with a tolerance which he has at no other time achieved. The Millers of his story have no tragic trials. They have tribulations. Their woes never fester into tragedy and all are good at heart.

With this tenderness, O'Neill revealed an unexpected reportorial instinct. Memories must have rushed back as he wrote it, so that every cadence of family speech among such simple people, every oddity of life in 1906, was totally recalled. It is a long way, and its pace is leisurely—perhaps now and then too leisurely. But it is funny and kind and charming, now as in 1933, when it first saw the lights of the Guild Theater. To me it seems rather better now than it did then. The change may very easily be in the reviewer.

I do not suppose, for example, that Harry Carey is really better as Nat Miller than George M. Cohan was, although certainly his gruff playing is simpler, and simplicity is of the essence. He makes Nat an utterly appealing figure, in any case. Tom Tully is delightful in the possibly sure-fire part of Sid Davis, the bibulous brother-in-law. William Prince plays Richard, the young lover, with remarkable perception and exercises wise restraint where overplaying would be easy and fatal.

Ann Shoemaker's worrying, fond mother is also exactly right, and Enid Markey plays beautifully the part of the old maid who is deprived of love, and not happy about it, but bears up in a manner surprising in an O'Neill character. Dorothy Littlejohn captures much, if perhaps not quite all, of the fragile charm of Muriel, who is loved in such appropriate moonlight. The Guild has done itself, and its favorite playwright, very proud indeed.

'AH, WILDERNESS!'

A comedy in three acts by Eugene O'Neill. Staged by Eva Le Gallienne. Settings by Watson Barratt. Revived by the Theater Guild at the Guild Theater on October 2, 1941. The cast:

Nat Miller	Harry Carey
Essie	Ann Shoemaker
Arthur	Victor Chapin
Richard	William Prince
Mildred	Virginia Kaye
Tommy	Tommy Lewis
Sid Davis	Tom Tully
Lily Miller	Enid Markey
David McComber	Hale Norcross
Muriel McComber	Dorothy Littlejohn
Wint Selby	Walter Craig
Belle	Dennie Moore
Nora	Philippa Bevans
Bartender	Zachary Scott
Salesman	Edmund Dorsay

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *October 3, 1941*

Ah, Wilderness! Remains Tender and Enjoyable

By JOHN MASON BROWN

EIGHT years to the night since it had first presented it, the Theater Guild last evening brought Ah, Wilderness! to the stage of its parent playhouse as the first production of its revival season.

Even without George M. Cohan, Eugene O'Neill's comedy of family life and adolescent love in a small Connecticut town at the century's turn remains uncommonly tender and enjoyable. Mr. Cohan's performance of the local newspaper publisher was, of course, one of the unforgettable theatrical performances of our time.

Harry Carey, whose difficult assignment it is to try to fill the celebrated Cohan shoes, is no George M. Cohan. But he is a good man; the kind of man in whom goodness shines like a neon sign. And this quality of his serves in the case of his Nat Miller as an adequate enough substitute for really playing the part.

When Ah, Wilderness! was first produced the surprise occasioned by it as a gentle and nostalgic comedy from Mr. O'Neill's austere hand tended in a way to eclipse the charming qualities of the script itself. To find the O'Neill smiling, to have him forget his cosmic worries, to encounter him when he was taking a vacation from tragedy and Freud, and to discover him lovingly pursuing a small theme for all the compassionate human values it contained, demanded an abrupt readjustment from many playgoers. Because dramatists, no less than actors, can be the victims of typecasting.

• • •

With this element of surprise gone, it is now possible to appreciate more fully the depth, the wisdom and the many human excellencies of Mr. O'Neill's comedy. It is a tribute to its author to confess that even without Mr. Cohan (and this is a serious loss) Ah, Wilderness! now seems better than it did at first. Granted that good plays are woefully scarce at present. But Mr. O'Neill's comedy, which was greeted with the salutes due a good play in a more productive season, proves to be the kind of script with which familiarity breeds only content.

One scene, and only one scene, turns out to be bothersome. And this one comes across as being even more troublesome than it did originally. I mean the episode in which the two young lovers who have been separated by their parents steal away to meet on the beach. Always over-long and a marshmallow without real flavor, the full ineffectiveness of this episode's writing was made the more unfortunately clear last night.

Elsewhere the play grows in its appeal. The Miller household is as charmingly established as it is sympathetically developed. The doting mother; the son at Yale who considers himself a grown man; the rebellious younger brother whose head teems with Wilde, Swinburne and The Rubaiyat; the father's dread of having to punish his son when he has come home drunk or tell him about sex; and the tragedy underlying the "Funny Man" patter of the drunken uncle—all of these are excellently developed in the script.

• • •

Furthermore, the writing is as gay as it is sympathetic. If few moments in the modern theater are more touching than the concluding episode in which the boy bashfully kisses his father, there is no family scene that I can think of which for honesty of observation is more hilarious than the well-known Fourth of July dinner, during which the father is fooled into eating bluefish and retells for the hundredth time a favorite story, forgetting he has ever told it before to the same group.

In Ah, Wilderness! Mr. O'Neill looked far into those minor crises which are major in all family circles. Of these crises he wrote not only affectionately but with a humor which is as uproarious as it is unforced. And most of his welcome values are well projected at the Guild.

• • •

Although Eva Le Gallienne's direction is overleisurely it is a job done with contagious affection. Her cast is on the whole an extremely good one which grows on those disturbed at first by memories of the original production. Although Mr. Carey may not as yet have got around to acting Nat Miller throughout, he looks him and feels him, which is helpful. If one excepts the overplayed servant, all the others, from Anne Shoemaker as the mother to Dennie Moore as the prostitute, are contributive. Enid Markey is touching as the old maid and Tom Tully immensely funny in his drunken scenes as the uncle. William Prince, though somewhat mature, gives a highly sensitive performance of the rebellious young son suffering from calf-love.

Indeed, in its present revival, Ah, Wilderness! is something which those who may not have seen the play before cannot afford to miss, and those who did see it would do well to see again.

"Ah, Wilderness"

Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, *October 3, 1941*

Eugene O'Neill's 'Ah, Wilderness!' Restaged by the Theatre Guild With Harry Carey

By BROOKS ATKINSON

NOT much doubt about it, the best play of the season so far is Eugene O'Neill's comedy of recollection, "Ah, Wilderness!" It was put on by the Theatre Guild in Fifty-second Street last evening, eight years to a day after the original performance. Most of us have shining memories of Mr. O'Neill's fond and beguiling play about life in Connecticut in 1906 and the growing pains of an American youth. Although the current performance lacks the fine comic texture of the one led by George M. Cohan, there is no reason for revising the first high impression of Mr. O'Neill's drama. He has written some greater plays than "Ah, Wilderness!" but he has never written one that is more enchanting.

* * *

Since eight years is a long time in or out of the theatre, many people probably do not know that a good many of the starry-eyed notions in "Ah, Wilderness!" are drawn from Mr. O'Neill's memories of his own youth and of the manners of New England thirty-five years ago. Although the play is not to be taken literally as autobiography, Mr. O'Neill did not invent Richard Miller's wondrous ideas about Swinburne, Wilde, Ibsen and Omar Khayyam nor his stormy rebellion against the obtuseness of the adult world. Looking back with affection to days that seem idyllically innocent now, Mr. O'Neill wrote a compassionate comedy about growing boys and girls, the first raptures of love, the simple anxieties of parents and the agonies of coming of age. When he wrote this comedy as an interlude in his main trade of tragic drama, Mr. O'Neill had a tender spot in his heart for it. There is no reason why he should change it now.

Like all true comedy, "Ah, Wilderness!" is tragedy in reverse. The personal crises that emerge as humorous in the writing might have been poignant if Mr. O'Neill had chosen to treat them that way. Although the current performance is enjoyable in Eva Le Gallienne's workmanlike direction, it is insensitive to the tragic overtones in the writing. It is too anxious to please. Harry Carey, in the part of the father, smiles too much and with too much kindness. As the clownish wayward uncle, Tom Tully is too uproariously drunk in the memorable dinner scene. As young Richard, William Prince's escapade in the gin mill develops into a brawl that is too theatrical, and his befuddled entrance at home is too melodramatic. The performance as a whole does considerable truckling.

* * *

But that completes this column's bill of exceptions to a performance which does communicate the substance of the work. If Mr. Carey is plainly more Montana than New England, his friendly benevolence and good cheer and his intelligence give the part he plays many attractive qualities. Ann Shoemaker has returned to the theatre after a long absence to play the part of the mother like a thoroughbred. Enid Markey is also excellent as the troubled spinster. Mr. Tully's hearty simplicity is good for Uncle Sid's contrite moments, and some of his revelry is vastly amusing. As the pot-house trollope, Dennie Moore is wonderfully inflammatory with the accent on humor. Dorothy Littlejohn as maidenly Muriel helps to translate the moonlight score into romantic magic. And Mr. Prince's neat, slender, restless acting preserves most of Richard's adolescent dignity and does not forget that the comedy has a pathetic side.

* * *

If the workmanship were a little finer-grained, the performance could convey a sense of pity that hovers around a good deal of Mr. O'Neill's comic writing. Not that this column is raising any churlish exceptions. For "Ah, Wilderness!" is a full and winning comedy as currently acted, and the Theatre Guild is to be thanked for reviving it. Incidentally, the prices range from 55 cents to $2.20 at the Guild's merciful box office.

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, *October 3, 1941*

The Guild's Revival Series Begins With "Ah, Wilderness!"

By WILELLA WALDORF

THE Theatre Guild's new Revival Series opened last night at the Guild Theatre with a production of Eugene O'Neill's "Ah, Wilderness!" that measures up in every respect to our memories of the original, done by the Guild exactly eight years ago. Some of last night's version struck us, in fact, as an improvement on the 1933 production, but there is very little point in stacking up the two performances against each other, for the news today is that the O'Neill comedy still provides a tender and amusing picture of family life in a small Connecticut town back in 1906, when the century was young and life was less raucous and more leisurely than it is today.

The big news in the Guild's 1933 production was the appearance of George M. Cohan as Nat Miller, the newspaper publisher whose young son, Richard, suddenly began to alarm his family by quoting Oscar Wilde, Swinburne and Omar Khayyam, and capped this by getting drunk in a low dive downtown when the girl next door sent him a letter spurning his attentions.

Mr. Cohan's performance was a memorable one, but last night Harry Carey, back from Hollywood, walked into the role as if it had been made for him. After a few moments of understandable nervousness in the first act, Mr. Carey got into his stride and played the mellow, understanding father with complete simplicity and charm.

Keeping pace with him as the bewildered son was William Prince, a young actor whose experience has been gained under Margaret Webster's direction in Maurice Evans' Shakespearean productions. A fledgling actor brought up on Shakespeare turns out to be a remarkably happy choice for the part of a boy given to dramatizing himself and erupting during emotional crises into "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" and other shocking volumes from his private library. Mr. Prince established himself last night as a young player of decided talent and charm.

"Ah, Wilderness!" was somewhat overlong when it was originally presented, and it still is, but O'Neill, like Shaw, is not only inclined to be a trifle wordy, but is apparently too important to be cut. That some trimming would improve the play is undeniable, but as is stands it is still a heart-warming piece, and Eva LeGallienne's staging brings out all of the tenderness and charm and comedy that O'Neill put into it.

Watson Barratt's period settings also helped considerably to establish the atmosphere of the early 1900's, and what is more, they were changed without endless waiting, a distinct asset in a play which has seven scenes and leaps around from the Miller's parlor to the back room of a bar and eventually to the moon-bathed beach.

The company Miss LeGallienne has gathered together for the revival is generally so good that it is difficult to mention all of those who deserve it, but Tom Tully as that genial card, Uncle Sid, who gets drunk quite often and is always so apologetic afterward, was a source of joy to the audience last night and even succeeded in making this reviewer forget Gene Lockhart, whose tipsy scene was a major delight back in 1933. Ann Shoemaker as the mother, Dennie Moore as Belle, the painted lady of the bar, and the company in general played well, including a newcomer named Virginia Kaye, who, as sister Mildred, indicated that she has something for Broadway.

Restless people will probably complain that the pace is too slow, especially at the beginning of the play, but things didn't move very fast in 1906, and Mr. O'Neill has not written a quick-on-the-trigger farce, after all, but a leisurely comedy full of characters who become more lifelike and amusing as one lives with them for a while.

"Ah, Wilderness!" opened without the benefit of an out-of-town tryout and seemed to miss it very little. It will stay at the Guild four weeks, and will be followed by "The Rivals" and other items of the Revival Series planned at low prices. This venture is outside the Guild's regular subscription season, which begins later, and seats sell for $2.20 down to 55c. Obviously this does not mean that any skimping is to be done in the productions, if last night's may be taken as a criterion. Miss LeGallienne and her Guild associates are to be congratulated on what promises to be a stimulating addition to the Broadway dramatic season.

"Ah, Wilderness"

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *October 3, 1941*

"Ah, Wilderness" Is Happily Revived by the Theatre Guild

"Ah, Wilderness," comedy by Eugene O'Neill. Revived by the Theatre Guild, Inc., at the Guild Theatre, New York, Oct. 2, 1941.

★ ★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

SEVERAL actors have played the father in "Ah, Wilderness" the last eight years. George Cohan in 1933 was the first, and remains the most unforgettable. But there have been a dozen others, counting those who have done it in stock. And none of them has failed to register a personal success.

That is because the part is expertly written. All it demands of any man is the art of expressing the simpler and more lovable human qualities. Tenderness and tolerance, compassion, humor and understanding. These are the attributes that make Nat Miller lovable, whether he functions through a Cohan, or a Will Rogers, or a Harry Carey.

It was Mr. Carey's turn at the Guild Theatre last night, and he came through it nervously, but smiling happily at the end. Smiling gratefully, too, for the very genuine applause with which the audience rewarded him.

Not a Star Play

"Ah, Wilderness" is not a star's play. Eugene O'Neill doesn't write star plays. He writes O'Neill plays. Stars help in the playing of them, but the plays, in turn, as surely help their players toward stardom.

There are three other parts in "Ah, Wilderness" that are pretty sure to boost the stock of those actors assigned to play them. One is the role of Sid Davis, Nat's brother-in-law, who lost Lily Miller 16 years before because he got drunk and forgot to take her to a picnic.

Sid is a comic drunk, but human. Gene Lockhart played him originally and went to Hollywood for a screen career. Last night Tom Tully played him and got the same kind of a reception. There was a happy response for the dinner scene and the blue fish joke went as well as ever.

The second star part is that of Richard, Nat's adolescent son who, being denied his love, goes on a bender in search of life, finds a girl in the backroom of a saloon, drinks two slow gin rickies and refuses to go upstairs because suddenly life disgusts him. Better, he decides, to live with his poets and his memory of Muriel than consort with baser interests.

Elisha Cook Jr. topped his career as the adolescent Richard. Now comes young William Prince to make the role his own for the time, and William was a great success last night. He had earnestness, and the vagueness that calf-love inspires and a believable self-assurance that never irritated.

Nice Support

And the third is the part of Belle, the small town hussy who overdoes the seduction of Richard. It is Belle's job not only to give Richard a fever, but slip such suspensive excitement to the innocent subscribers that they will report the shock through the home neighborhood and help trade.

Dennie Moore knows this business as well as any of the observing character comedienness and proved it without too great extravagance last night.

The support helps, too. Anne Shoemaker makes a nice, comfortable Essie, who is the worried mother. Hale Norcross and Walter Craig were able to make their minute bits as old man Macomber and the sophisticated son of Yale count. Enid Markey had more trouble with Lily, but got by.

There are new settings by Watson Barratt and Eva LeGallienne directed. It is not the LeGallienne choice in plays, but she is a thorough person and knows her theatre.

Thus the Guild inaugurates the first intelligently conceived revival season this theatre capital has known. Success, I hope and believe, will attend it.

Reprinted from NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN, *October 3, 1941*

'Ah, Wilderness' Revived By Guild

Harry Carey Appears in Role of Father in O'Neill Comedy of Adolescence

By JOHN ANDERSON

SINCE it seems impossible to get O'Neill's numerous new plays out of his desk and on to a stage crying for them, it is good to have the old ones around, and doubly gratifying to have one of them used by the Theatre Guild in starting off its season of popular-priced revivals last night in the Mother House.

"Ah, Wilderness," to be sure, doesn't seem to be a very old play, for it was only eight years ago to the very night that the Guild put the curtain up on the opening performance. It was then that a somewhat astonished but delighted audience discovered that our Master of Tragedy had turned his mind back to his own youth to write a comedy of deep tenderness and wise humor about the growing pains of a sensitive lad back in Connecticut in 1906.

Within his glowing reminiscence, O'Neill caught a perfect picture of an average American family and set it down with shining honesty that makes it true, and funny, and sad, and altogether endearing. The mood of affectionate retrospect never softens to sentimental reverie, or mere cloying sweetness. It is as strong, spiritually, as O'Neill's more serious work, but warmly human and gently heart-breaking—a play to be seen, and seen again, and cherished among the happiest of playgoing memories.

Here, in the powerful strokes of the First Dramatist, are simply folks, the salt, as they say, of the earth, concerned with the universal problems of youth and age, of growing up and growing old. Young Dick Miller, in the throes of adolescence, threatens to kick over the traces, goes on a binge over what he thinks, poetically, is a broken heart, gets plastered and then pulls himself together, with the guidance of a wise father, a patient mother and a loving sweetheart.

Superbly Drawn

All the characters of a big family group are superbly drawn, and since he is a realist O'Neill knows the whole picture can't be pretty and happy. Uncle Sid is a worthless, but engaging sot wasting his life away, and Aunt Lily, who loves him, prefers to be a jittery old maid rather than marry the rascal. Young Dick's effort to forget his youthful sorrows in sin includes a bawdy scene with a prostitute in the back room of a saloon and suggests both the tragedy and comedy of the situation; and the final scene of father and son, in mutual understanding and respect, is profoundly touching, without slushy emphasis or cheap effect.

In the original production, George M. Cohan seemed practically perfect as Nat Miller. He suggested vividly the genial humor and inner strength of the character, his goodness and abiding integrity, and in addition he gave the whole play the impact and vitality of a high tension performance.

Carey's Acting

To say that Harry Carey is not George M. Cohan is one thing, but to say he is not Nat Miller is quite another. He is not as good a Nat Miller, not as benignant, nor as shrewd, nor as sensitive; but he is a Nat Miller of compassionate nature, a little too solemn, plain, fatherly, and not very interesting. His performance, as kindly as it is, lacks the propulsion of full-bodied playing, and he misses the sly subtleties by which the one and only George M. gave his own sharp comments on family and other life.

Under Miss LeGallienne's direction, the others vary considerably. Tom Tully is immensely amusing as the drunken uncle, and in the hang-over scene of repentance, genuinely touching. Enid Markey emphasizes the humor more than the heartbreak of Sid's disappointed sweetheart, and the younger members of the family are attractively played, notably by William Prince as young Dick in a performance of poignant and vivid effect. Dennie Moore plays the back-room wench with much gusto; and while Miss LeGallienne's direction serves the broader intentions of the script, it is not a complete or vigorous illumination.

It seems a pity that O'Neill hasn't worked a little over the scene on the beach and cut it down, especially the opening soliloquy, which is awkward and unnecessary.

But defects and all, it is a fine comedy of true values and enduring interest, and as I was saying eight years ago, when we were interrupted, I recommend it heartily.

"Best Foot Forward"

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *October 2, 1941*

Best Foot Forward Carries Off Blue Ribbons

By JOHN MASON BROWN

YOUTH and Pleasure meet in Best Foot Forward to provide one of those rejuvenating evenings at which George Abbott is a master. His new musical comedy amounts theatrically to a Children's Crusade. It is a Youth Movement of mass proportions. Nearly all of its performers are so dazzlingly young that most of us could have sworn they must have come to the Ethel Barrymore on scooters.

But they are as full of energy as they are lacking in years. Moreover, their skill is no less startling than their immaturity. Where they can have picked up so much authority, when they are within crying distance of the cradle, is one of those questions which must remain a question unless Mr. Abbott knows the answer. And he probably does. I suspect he is it. Be that as it may, these colts who romp through Best Foot Forward behave like veterans in the ring. What is more, they carry off Blue Ribbons.

They are even younger than were the coeds in Too Many Girls, which, after all, was a college musical, whereas Best Foot Forward is laid in a prep school. Unless the Play Schools are careful, Mr. Abbott will be invading them next to bob up with a stageful of adult talent in rompers.

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John Cecil Holm's book, though not to be mentioned in the same breath with Mr. Holm's Three Men on a Horse, is more than serviceable. Its subject is the complications which arise when a famous movie star accepts, on her press agent's advice, a student's invitation to a dance, and then finds that her escort has also invited a little innocent his own age, who proceeds to turn up.

Mr. Holm's contribution is, however, no more than an agreeable excuse for Mr. Abbott's striplings to strut their stuff. And strut it they proceed to do—amazingly. Although these youngsters may be wet behind the ears, they know more than a thing or two. Furthermore, they managed to share their knowledge without ever seeming precocious. Although they are professionals, the curse of "stage children" is not on them. As some 60 of them stomp, cavort, twirl, prance and zing their way through Best Foot Forward they are never deliberately "cute." There is not a brat in the bunch. They are merely blessedly young, wonderfully expert and contagiously high-spirited.

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Some of us remember Good News. But that was years ago, when we were almost contemporary with its cast. Best Foot Forward is different. It puts us physically on the shelf at the same time that it takes our spirits off. With the greatest tact it manages to persuade us that we have been drinking from Ponce de Leon's fountain, even while it is reminding us that we are more dated than coffee.

Although asked to supply such backgrounds as a school gymnasium, a student's room, a girl's dormitory and the bedroom of a small-town hotel, Jo Mielziner has managed to give wings to the commonplace. His settings are brilliantly imaginative. They are sparing in their details, happy in the colors, and as witty in their suggestions as are the totem poles of athletic figures by means of which he establishes the gym.

Miles White's individual costumes are as disconcerting as his costumes for the choruses are effective. The music and lyrics of Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane have throughout, if one excepts—as one must—the tedious geographical song called Where Do You Travel? a most welcome and inspiriting vitality. Particularly excellent are such numbers as That's How I Love the Blues, The Three B's (which, needless to say, are not the traditional ones) and the rousing chorus of Buckle Down, Winsocki.

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Mr. Abbott has long since proved himself a Columbus of new talent. Marty May can hardly be described as one of his discoveries. He is around as a middle-aged press agent to make some of us not just admitted to high school feel a little more cheerful. And Rosemary Lane of screen fame is far more than acceptable both in her singing and playing as the young movie actress. But the juveniles—the kids who would make Mickey Rooney feel like Foxy Grandpa—are the evening's major joy, especially when they start dancing Gene Kelly's admirable routines.

Among these youngsters some mention, as startled as it is grateful, must be made of Maureen Cannon, who is delightful as the little ingenue who must compete with the movie star; of Gil Stratton, Jr.; Jack Jordan, Jr., and Kenneth Bowers; of such pleasant maidens as Victoria Schools and June Allyson; but, above all, of Nancy Walker. Miss Walker is a superior comic. She knows her way around in a song. She will not only go, but has gone, places as a performer because, in addition to her surety, she is blessed with an epidemic personality.

All in all, the evening is a fresh and engaging one. Best Foot Forward should keep The Professional Children's School busy in the coming months. And stage mothers. Yes, and audience, too.

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By RICHARD WATTS, *Jr.*

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The grave suspicion that I have become a sour fellow, without regard for youth and gayety, strikes me when I proceed herewith to contemplate various undoubted merits of the new show. The score by two gentlemen hitherto unknown to me, Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane, is likable and attractive, reaching its high point in a school song called "Buckle Down, Winsocki," which is so much better than most university anthems that some wise college might well adopt it. When Stuart Langley is singing "Winsocki" and the chorus is parading about the stage to its accompaniment, "Best Foot Forward" is being the show that it should be. There are other good numbers, too, in particular "Sometime," "Shady Lady Bird" and a highly educational geographical number called "Where Do You Travel?" In addition, the dances have been staged with the proper freshness and enthusiasm by Gene Kelly, of "Pal Joey" fame.

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The book, however, is of minimum help to the evening. Possibly Mr. Abbott's previous production, "Pal Joey," which had a narrative that could stand by itself, has spoiled us for anything so feeble as the libretto which John Cecil Holm offers about the fading film star, who decides to get some publicity by accepting a shy student's invitation to the school prom. Despite "Pal Joey" I do not demand that the story of a musical comedy should be invariably sturdy, racy or dramatic. In "Best Foot Forward," though, the book strikes me as going a little too far for comfort, in addition to rearing its dubious head far too often for the good of the show. The antics of the film star and her press agent and the ingenuous prep school boys and the merry sub-debs and the harried schoolmasters seemed to be more than faintly depressing.

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Then, to be utterly choleric and disagreeable, I must confess that the youthful players didn't cause me the greatest of pleasure, either. They are fresh and unspoiled and eager, and those are fine qualities, but somehow or other they do not make youth so fascinating or enviable as such a show really should. I thought a young dancer named Betty Anne Nyman, who looks like June Preisaer, of the films, had the proper quality and that the ingenue, another newcomer named Maureen Cannon, approached it at moments, but on the other hand while the rest of the audience seemed to take delight in the antics of Nancy Walker, I remained colder than ever. As for Miss Rosemary Lane, who has come on from Hollywood to play an actress from Hollywood, I can truthfully say that there are those who admire all of the Lane Sisters tremendously. Then, in closing, it is only fair for me to add that I have every reason to believe that this will be a minority report on the first Abbott production of the season.

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They are gay and comical youngsters, most of them evidently on the brighter side of 20. They are tireless, with the proper tirelessness of youth. They can dance their feet off and come up fresh and smiling. Most of the boys have comical, engaging faces and the set smiles of their profession have not yet settled on the lips of the chorus girls. They are all apt to get a little breathless with exertion and enthusiasm. They make "Best Foot Forward" a fresh and smiling show.

Little of their material will, I suspect, prove to be historic. Mr. Holm, who once made history of a sort by writing "Three Men on a Horse," provides a story which is suitable to the youngsters without overstraining their histrionic ability or, too much, the audience's credulity. His story is all about a movie star, momentarily between contracts, who shows up at a school "prom" somewhere in the region of the Pennsylvania Dutch. Sort of a prep school it seems to be, and the movie star goes off like a firecracker. The boys and girls take her clothes off to provide souvenirs; she turns up in the boys' dormitory; her presence strains true young love, and in the end she wears her heart of gold on her sleeve, and sets everything right. Just enough story to go around, in other words.

Gil Stratton Jr. is uncommonly, and a little wistfully, droll as the boy who invited her and Miss Rosemary Lane is handsome and melodious as the lady herself. A good many of the others stop the show. There's an odd young woman, with a long face and a fine feeling for rowdy comedy, who stops it cold with her part of "The Three B's" and again with "Just a Little Joint With a Juke Box." That would be Nancy Walker. And Maureen Cannon makes them hold everything with "Everytime" and "Shady Lady Bird." These are all gay and charming songs. June Allyson and Kenneth Bowers hold things up with "What Do You Think I Am?" and Tommy Dix, a small lad with a large voice, is comical as he sings "Buckle Down, Winsocki."

Jo Mielziner has got the right casual note into his settings, although I got just a little tired of his totem pole of athletes in the gymnasium set. The dances Gene Kelly directed are things to watch. But it really isn't the details which matter; few of the details merit superlatives.

It's the boys and girls who make it roll. Their youth, more than any other one thing, makes "Best Foot Forward" captivating.

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It flaunts its adolescence proudly and provides, I gathered from the exuberant First Nighters, just the right kiddie kar entertainment for elderly tots romping in Broadway's hothouse nursery.

I half expected to find perambulators in the carriage line at the curb, after an evening that was pretty steadily cute.

Though they are extremely young the boys and girls in the show have apparently learned to talk, some of them sing, and all of them, I suspect, danced out of their cradles. Under Gene Kelly's unflagging dance direction they are the dancingest youngsters around town, full of exuberant rhythms and gyrations and innocent merriment. They can cut capers as well as rugs, and when the stage is heaving in full swing it is a sight.

The story that John Cecil Holm has provided is not as funny as his "Three Men on a Horse," but maybe it isn't supposed to be. It has to do with a lad at Winsocki School, near Philadelphia, who invited a Hollywood movie star to the Junior Prom, and found, much to everybody's surprise, that she accepted.

His own jilted girl friend provides a little heart-break as the boys mob the screen star who loses her clothes, and there is a little pop in and pop out fun in the dormitory, with the headmaster and the lingerie before a happy ending.

This mild tale, which has no very funny lines to enliven its not very funny situations, is happily interrupted by many songs and dances, and the music and lyrics by Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane, provide the large cast with just the place for its heart and feet, in case they are not in the same anatomical spot.

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Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, *October 2, 1941*

George Abbott Opens Musical Comedy Season With Prep School Scuffle, 'Best Foot Forward'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

TO OPEN the musical comedy season, George Abbott has been good enough to assemble the freshman class and put them through some highly enjoyable paces. "Best Foot Forward," is what he calls the exercises, which were staged with professional skill at the Ethel Barrymore last evening. After the melancholy that Broadway has been through in the past few weeks, it is a pleasure to sit down to a fresh, good-humored show with a good book by John Cecil Holm, author of "Three Men On a Horse," excellent music and lyrics by Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane, and all the beguilements of a well-turned evening. Probably you never heard of any of Mr. Abbott's current progeny excepting Rosemary Lane, who plays the part of a girl who must be all of 25 years of age. But like the good, gray dean of old Winsocki, Mr. Abbott has selected them for calf-comedy and native friskiness, and two or three of them are notably talented.

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What happens is almost too innocent to be mentioned in this wicked neighborhood. One of the boys in a polite preparatory school has had the temerity to invite a sizzling movie star to the senior prom. Since she is slightly passé in Hollywood, where arthritis sets in in the twenties, she throws the boy into confusion by accepting, privately hoping for a little favorable publicity. Her appearance at the prom is more of a sensation than she had expected. The school goes mad. Souvenir hunters strip her practically to the pelt. The complications that follow in a well-bred school are the chief burden of Mr. Holm's light-fingered fable.

As a producer Mr. Abbott has a special talent for handling young people who are hardly yet formed in the image of men and women. "Brother Rat," "What a Life" and "Too Many Girls" are evidence of his quizzical benevolence as school teacher. Look for none of the sleazy glamour of night life on Broadway in his scuffle. The boys are amusingly gauche; and although it is lacking in gentility to imply that any girl in her teens is not a stunner, the implication is here passed over in silence. In the case of Nancy Walker, it becomes a sort of triumph, for she is a hard-boiled skirt who is tremendously funny. Not that June Allyson is not a winner, for she is a sunny blonde with considerable charm, and dimpled Betty Anne Nyman is a sawed-off hoofer who radiates personality.

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It is perhaps no special secret that young people can dance. Gene Kelly, who made with his feet in "The Time of Your Life" and "Pal Joey," has understood the point and directed some droll and whirling dances. The music and lyric makers have been equally inventive, without being afraid of rhythm and melody. "Buckle Down, Winsocki" is a song highly recommended to any school in need of such. "Shady Lady Bird," which is charmingly sung by Maureen Cannon, is a good thing to begin a season on. Having a proper appreciation of fine concert music and elegant burlesque, Mr. Martin and Mr. Blane have set to riotous music the dedication of the Lower Basin Street Chamber Music Society—"The Three B's," which are barrelhouse, blues and boogie-woogie. On the whole, the score of "Best Foot Forward" can be set down as a success.

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If the sand in the office hour-glass were not slipping away so rapidly there would be time to say something appreciative of Miss Lane's humorous acting and her business-like good-nature, and of Gil Stratton, Jr.'s misty bewilderment as the prep school swain who is out of his depth. As an ancient Hollywood press agent, who must be close to 40, Marty May has something genuine to contribute to the occasion. Jo Mielziner, the princely scene-designer, has never fitted a show to a neater suit of settings. And, since Mr. Abbott has already selected "Best Foot Forward" as the title, there is no point in remarking that he is following his own counsel. Quite a lot of best feet are put forward in the first musical show of the season. They are light feet, also; not a creak in a stageful.

Reprinted from NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM", *October 2, 1941*

The Best So Far Is Not So Bad

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

AFTER feeding a slot machine over and over again without getting a red cent back, you don't have to hit the jackpot to have your spirits raised; and after what we've been going through in the theater since the night of Sept. 3, you don't have to encounter a masterpiece to break out mildly into song. *Best Foot Forward*, which George Abbott offered last night as the season's first musical, is far from a masterpiece, but it deserves a good many of the more conservative type of adjectives. It is pleasing and lively and as fresh as milk in the pail; and it's so sensationally youthful that you would have to be a talent scout to recognize more than three or four members of the cast. Hugh Martin's music and Ralph Blane's lyrics, while they lack a certain suavity, are catchy and gay enough; Gene Kelly has worked out some fast and ingenious dance routines; and George Abbott has given the show most, though not quite all, of his usual sock.

Best Foot Forward is another of Abbott's extravaganzas about people under voting age: a high-school version of his collegiate *Too Many Girls* or, if it makes matters any clearer, a musical companion to *What a Life*. Its drama, dealing with a senior prom, tells how a young man, very wet behind the ears, rashly invites a movie star to be his partner in the revel, and how the star, who is slipping in Hollywood, accepts his bid for the publicity she thinks it will bring her. It need hardly be added that in a world principally devoted to isosceles triangles and Latin verbs this is enough to stir up vast commotion, involving danger as well as delight, and stern faculty members as well as giddy students.

To be captious, one act of this kind of thing is better than two—and not because the youthful high spirits tend to flag, but precisely because they don't. The Rover Boy atmosphere, I'm afraid, gets to be a trifle wearing, and kids who at first seemed cute get to seem a little too cute. All the same, if Act II isn't an unmixed blessing, it has plenty of go to it, as well as the best song in the show, *Buckle Down, Winsocki*—a tribute to Alma Mater which, for once, isn't just a parody, but an infectious tune.

Rosemary Lane has abandoned Hollywood to play one of its glamour girls on Broadway, which she does pleasantly enough. It's the kids, however, who walk off with the show: Maureen Cannon, who is petite and full of personality and does particularly well singing *Shady Lady Bird*; Nancy Walker, who is amusing as a toughie who comes to the prom on a blind date, and Gil Stratton, Jr., who as the stupe who invited the star, is very skillfully gauche. Indeed, almost all the youngsters show freshness and zip; and they manage, as could none of their elders last month, to get the new season pointed in the right direction.

"Best Foot Forward"

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *October 2, 1941*

"Best Foot Forward" Is Youth On a Musical Comedy Binge

"Best Foot Forward," musical comedy by John Cecil Holm, with music and lyrics by Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane. Produced by George Abbott at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, New York, Oct. 1, 1941.

★ ★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

THERE is at least a note of joyousness sounded in "Best Foot Forward" at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre that has been sadly missing from this early theatre season. That makes it something to be thankful for, even though it may not reach completely adult standards as entertainment.

Old Master George Abbott has succeeded in out-smarting the selective draft bill by engaging himself a company of forty youngsters who will not be called to service for another year or two.

They are gifted youngsters. Some sing. Some tumble. Practically all of them dance with grace plus a riotous spirit of youth. Happily none of them tries too hard to appear over sophisticated. It is a gay troupe, full of pep and bursting with enthusiasm.

John Cecil Holm, whose previous stage contribution was "Three Men on a Horse," has fashioned a story about Bud Hooper, an adventurous prep school student who wrote to Gale Joy, a famous movie actress, inviting her to be his mate at the Winsocki school prom, never thinking she would accept.

To Fool the Press

Gale was about to toss the invitation after the rest of her fan letters when her press agent conceived the idea of having her carry through the lark for the good the publicity might do her.

Bud's real girl, fired with jealousy, starts a collection of souvenirs by tearing off Gale's sash at the dance. Her pals complete the job by stripping the actress down to her silhouette, providing the familiar school scandal and the sex note so characteristic of the Abbott musical shows.

Rosemary Lane is the decorative young lady who steps into the plot and out of her gown. She has been a soloist with the Fred Waring band and a screen actress who gained considerable notice as one of the heroines of such pictures as "Four Daughters" and "Hollywood Hotel."

This musical comedy assignment is new to her, but she takes to it with an agreeable assurance and a pleasant voice.

Her gay companions include a couple of pint-size singing ingenues, Maureen Cannon and Nancy Walker. Miss Cannon comes from Chicago, where genius blossoms early, as the Quiz Kids have demonstrated over the air. She is pretty, sings well and has sufficient sense of character to help with her acting.

Gil Stratton, Jr. is one of the Abbott boys, having interrupted his education at St. Lawrence University to follow a stage career, probably at the expressed regret of his parents. He has played in "Brother Rat" and "What a Life" and may, who knows, turn out to be another Ezra Stone. Gil is the adventurous Bud.

Old and Young

Jack Jordan Jr. is another of the principals, but Jack has had a theatrical past inasmuch as his parents are vaudeville folk. Nancy Walker, who as a favorite with last night's audience as a rough gal looking for a blind date, also has a theatrical background, her father being Dewey Barto of the Barto and Mann team in "Hellzapoppin."

Victoria Schools is a youthful prima donna with operatic ambitions and a voice that will help her a lot. June Allyson is a dancer who has had stage experience understudying Betty Hutton, the jitterbug in "Panama Hattie," and Betty Anne Nyman has been dancing professionally long enough to have perfected her taps.

There are flocks of others, including Tommy Dix, a little fellow with a sizable baritone voice. And a few oldsters to give the cast balance—Marty May, who does well by the agent, and Fleming Ward, who plays the school principal. Much of the music is fresh and interesting and the lyrics smart and timely.

Jo Mielziner has saved the backers money on a production that is fairly attractive and economical. Miles White has designed some rather attractive costumes and Gene Kelly, our first "Pal Joey," has put a lot of zip into the dances. Mr. Abbott, of course, did his own directing.

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, *October 2, 1941*

"Best Foot Forward," Season's First Musical, at the Barrymore

By WILELLA WALDORF

LAST season George Abbott produced "Pal Joey," which was not for children.

This season he has gone to the other extreme and launched a Youth Movement at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. "Best Foot Forward" is the title, and it is a musical comedy bursting with adolescence. Anybody over twenty who happens to be connected with it appears haggard and drawn. The locale is a boys' prep school and the performance is as deliriously amateur as anything the students and their prom girls might have put on in the gym. Relatives of the youthful company are sure to love it. The rest of us, with no great-grandchildren worth mentioning, will probably remain dangerously calm and sneak out early longing for just one glimpse of Ethel Merman—no babe in arms, but a professional, God bless her!

When Mr. Abbott started holding auditions for kiddies all over the country last summer nearly every family afflicted with a tap-dancing son, or a daughter with a "voice," entered its offspring in the competition, and it took weeks of patient weeding to reveal the flower of the crop.

The Youth Movement seemed a good idea at the time, but last night, after the first onslaught of fresh, unspoiled talent struck the stage, shouting cute little songs and turning enthusiastic handsprings, the idea seemed less good. As the evening wore on and it developed John Cecil Holm's book concerned a waning movie actress who accepts an invitation to the school prom for publicity purposes, the performance more and more resembled the efforts of a gang of sophomores to put on scenes from old Broadway musical comedies.

In the interest of verisimilitude, Mr. Abbott engaged Miss Rosemary Lane, a film actress, to play the Hollywoodite whose option has not been taken up, and whose agent therefore scents a big publicity story in having her attend the school prom with an adolescent swain. Miss Lane, in an ungrateful role—she appeared to be forgotten half the time while the children romped—made the best of it and gave a good, forthright performance, also managing to look surprisingly attractive in what we assume were clothes designed as a take-off on Hollywood couturiers.

The young people all seemed to dance with abandon and exhibit uninhibited lung-power in the musical numbers, which ranged from boogie-woogie to indigo blues and gentle waltzes, and were equipped with lyrics of the Cole Porter genre.

Identifying individual children was difficult, but Gil Stratton, Jr. made an engaging figure of the poor fellow who asked the movie actress to come to the prom, and had his own girl on his hands as well. Nancy Walker knew her way through the tough comedy routine, June Allyson contributed jitterbugging of the Betty Hutton school, and Tommy Dix revealed a robust baritone which he pushed to the limit in the school marching song.

Twenty minutes or half an hour of "Best Foot Forward" was enough for this department. The rest was boredom.

"Mr. Big"

Reprinted from NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN, *October 1, 1941*

'Mr. Big' Presented at Lyceum Theatre

Kaufman Makes Bow As Producer With Comic Murder Mystery

By JOHN ANDERSON

MR. KAUFMAN made his bow as a producer at the Lyceum last night by presenting "Mr. Big," or at least something that is called "Mr. Big" but which looks a good deal more like three jiggers of "The Spider" mixed with two jiggers of "Hellzapoppin."

The resulting blend is a comic murder mystery which sprawls over the stage and the auditorium and takes in so much territory that the play is scattered and lost—as loose, miscellaneous, and disorganized as a bag of marbles.

Taking the script of Arthur Sheekman and Margaret Shane the inventive Mr. Kaufman has tricked it out with all the gadgets he can think of in the way of direction, and Mr. Kaufman is famous for thinking up amusing trimmings.

Cops, stage hands, actors, stooges in the audience, radio announcers, and politicians swarm fore and aft of the footlights in a show so formless that its comedy and its mystery spend the evening in elaborate but uninteresting collision. The result is a pretty complete stalemate.

If you remember, "The Spider"—that clever and fascinating murder mystery, in which the audience witnessed an on-stage murder during the performance and stayed with the cops until the final clink of the handcuffs, if you remember "The Spider" you will recognize the pattern at once as a sort of "Hellzapoppin" with plot, but without music.

Neat New Twist

At the outset of "Mr. Big" it appeared that the authors had at least given the idea a neat new twist. The curtain goes up and we see a group of actors bowing prettily behind the footlights. The curtain comes down and we hear the stooge applause greeting what is, apparently, the final curtain on a Broadway First Night. The curtain goes up again and the star makes a curtain speech, salutes the District Attorney, who is candidate for Governor, sitting in the stage box, and in a couple of minutes keels over dead, a steel needle, tipped with poison among his innards.

From then on the place crawls with clues, motives, and so on, larded over with such touches as the ham actor getting out his press book for the police, the stage hands demanding overtime, and telling the D. A. not to move the furniture, of the D. A. trying to call his office over an unconnected stage telephone, of a shy little magician who thinks he knows who did it and gets himself bumped off for murder No. 2, of jealousy among leading ladies, fun among the newspapermen, and ribbing of political candidates.

Mr. Kaufman whips all this up with the desperate, but useless energy of a man running an egg beater in an empty bowl. Some of the stray passages are briefly effective but finally pointless.

That excellent comic, Oscar Polk, makes the dead actor's Negro valet a figure of casual fun, Harry Gribbon, who was so delightful last year as a police officer in "Delicate Story," makes the most of a burlesque commissioner, too broadly written to be really good, and Florenz Ames, stationed in the audience, lends amusing touches of impetuous interruption to the sagging evening.

E. J. Ballentine creates a bright sketch of the little magician, Fay Wray supplies the beauteous portrait of the love interest, and Barry Sullivan is excellent as a mysterious stranger, who appeared to have the only set of full time wits on the stage.

Mr. Cronyn's Fate

Through it all goes little Mr. Big, the District Attorney, the central part played for more than it is worth by Hume Cronyn. It has been young Mr. Cronyn's fate so far in the theatre to tackle parts so badly written that I suspect he must read them with a ouija board. Yet he has invariably given the impression that he could be a brilliant farceur with the right material. In advance it seemed he couldn't go wrong with Mr. Kaufman—but well, just look. Or don't look. I'm not asking you to prove it.

Since the First Nighters at the Lyceum were supposed, for the saks of the play, to be held by the police they were served refreshments during intermissions, and Ray Mayer, in addition to giving an admirable performance, gave me a sandwich.

I hate to bite the hand that fed me, but the sandwich, though hammy, was the freshest item of a badly botched evening.

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, *October 1, 1941*

George S. Kaufman Presents "Mr. Big" at the Lyceum Theatre

By WILELLA WALDORF

GEORGE S. KAUFMAN, whose name on a playbill almost always means that another hit has come to town, officially launched himself as a Broadway producer last night at the Lyceum Theatre, with a mystery comedy entitled "Mr. Big."

Mr. Kaufman has directed his production in a frenzy of excitement and ingenuity, but unfortunately he neglected also to write the play.

"Mr. Big" starts out with a highly amusing idea that the authors, Arthur Sheekman and Margaret Shane, never manage to develop. The curtain rises on the ending of a Broadway play, with the first-night audience applauding the company. The actor-manager of the occasion steps out to make a curtain speech and suddenly falls dead on the stage. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, the Police Commissioner and the District Attorney are both in the audience, and the District Attorney hopes to be elected governor of the state next Tuesday. What better opportunity to exhibit his prowess as a public servant before a crowd of voters forbidden by the police to leave the theatre until the case is cleared up?

Batteries of Gags

Bursting with old campaign speeches, the youthful D. A. takes the stage to find out who murdered Henry Stacey, and although Mr. Kaufman explodes battery after battery of stunts and gags all over the theatre, "Mr. Big" actually has little to offer in the novelty line after the first few minutes. The authors obviously were hard put to it to keep the curtain up for three acts, and even though a second corpse is introduced as the finale of Act 2, "Mr. Big" is a dull play.

In a vigorous effort to keep things moving despite the lethargic script, Mr. Kaufman comes charging in with everything he can lay his hands on to entertain an audience. Some of the gags are hilarious, indicating that the old magic touch is still there, but others, oddly enough, only succeed in emphasizing the sad fact that things have bogged down pretty badly on the stage. There is a desperately labored quality about "Mr. Big" at times. You can almost hear Mr. Kaufman breathing heavily from the wings.

Hard-Working Cast

The populous cast is headed by Hume Cronyn, one of this department's favorite actors. As the District Attorney he is dynamic and as amusing as anybody could be in the role. The fact that the play eventually becomes too much for him, as for the rest, is his hard luck, and ours.

Helpful, too, were Betty Furness, who has a dry comedy style not unlike Luella Gear's, Harry Gribbon as the Police Commissioner, Ray Mayer as a belligerent stage hand, Eleanor Phelps as a lady in a very bad situation, E. J. Ballantine as a bewildered magician, Nina Doll as a budding actress, James MacDonald as a distracted stage manager, Barry Sullivan as a gentleman from Australia, Le Roi Operti as an actor who once played with Tree, and a horde of others.

The most amusing performance of the evening, however, was that given by the colored actor, Oscar Polk, as the slain actor's dresser. Mr. Polk had the most consistently humorous lines of the evening, and he delivered them inimitably. Florenz Ames, as Charles G. Wakeshaw, a legal light after publicity, kept leaping up just across the aisle to thrust himself into the limelight and was finally ejected from the theatre by stage police as we were all going home. The unidentified lady who sat just behind us and screamed and gurgled on cue also deserves a word of praise. There were almost as many actors in the audience as there were on the stage.

The redoubtable Donald Oenslager contributed one of his effective settings to the festivities, and if enough people can be found to whom it is a novelty for actors to spring up out of the audience, Mr. Kaufman may be able to do very nicely with "Mr. Big." He and his cast have worked hard enough over it to deserve at least a moderate success. To this reviewer, however, it came as a disappointment.

"Mr. Big"

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, *October 1, 1941*

'Mr. Big,' a Murder Burlesque, Is Offered at the Lyceum Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

GEORGE S. KAUFMAN produced his first play and fed his audience sandwiches last evening at the Lyceum Theater, thus beating "Hellzapoppin" by several slices of baloney. With the aid of a couple of playwrights, Mr. Kaufman arranged murders on the stage and hullabaloo in the auditorium, mixing with these a few satirical shafts at a certain district attorney and some rough-and-ready crime detection.

These elements, shaken together, constitute "Mr. Big," which was written by Arthur Sheekman and Margaret Shane and stirred violently by Mr. Kaufman himself. But all Mr. Kaufman's stirring has not made the concoction smooth. It is lumpy festivity, now pretty funny and as often pretty flat. And often murder curdles mirth, as it is apt to do. The two remain difficult to mix; such a fine broth as "Arsenic and Old Lace" is an exception, not a rule.

In "Mr. Big" the victim is an actor, murdered by poison dart just as he is making an appreciative curtain speech. He is surrounded by friends and enemies all extremely suspectible. And in an upper box are Harley L. Miller, a comic district attorney and candidate for Governor, and Oscar Cullen, an even funnier police commissioner. They take matters in hand and Mr. Miller breaks constantly into amusingly burlesqued political speeches. They are plagued by unruly incidents and are almost overwhelmed when the finger of suspicion points impolitely at a big campaign contributor. But in spite of everything, the murder is solved.

Along with this goes a lot more. People shout and heckle from the audience. Pigeons are let loose. Hume Cronyn, playing Mr. Miller, is hoisted into the flies. Innocent bystanders from the audience are done away with. The audience is fed. During intermissions, interesting strays make addresses from the stage. Policemen charge up and down the aisles and the gags fall in showers.

And, grievously, it doesn't come off. The reasons for failure are moderately clear. The mystery story itself is sharply below standard, being at once hackneyed and implausible. The gags are only sometimes hilarious. The jokes distract attention from the play; the necessity sometimes to take the play seriously interferes with the comedy. Mr. Kaufman, our most accomplished theatrical juggler, has this time tossed more into the air than he could catch coming down.

Mr. Cronyn is broadly funny as the district attorney. Half a dozen accomplished actors are comical in brief moments. Oscar Polk, that great dark man, is a comedy in himself. Fay Wray is sleek and able and Betty Furnace is suavely biting. Harry Gribbon is worth several medium-sized guffaws and the others in the almost more than ample cast make no apparent errors. But they can't make "Mr. Big" come up to all our hopes.

'MR. BIG'

A comedy in three acts by Arthur Sheekman and Margaret Shane; staged by George S. Kaufman; setting by Donald Oenslager; presented by Mr. Kaufman at the Lyceum Theatre on September 30, 1941. The cast:

Henry Stacey	George Baxter
Paula Loring	Fay Wray
Leo Orton	Judson Laire
Myra Davenport	Nina Doll
Joan Starling	Ann Evers
Mack	James MacDonald
Dr. Willoughby	Richard Barbee
Bill	Ray Mayer
Stanwood	Le Roi Operti
Mrs. Jessup	Eleanor Phelps
Oscar Cullen	Harry Gribbon
Mr. Jessup	Jack Leslie
Harley L. Miller	Hume Cronyn
Charles G. Wakeshaw	Florenz Ames
The Little Man	E. J. Ballantine
Amy Stevens	Betty Furness
Carter	George Petrie
Nesbitt	Robert Whitehead
Kennedy	David Crowell
Eric Reynolds	Barry Sullivan
Rodney	Oscar Polk
Broadway Sarah	Mitzi Hajos
Johnny Tilley	Sidney Stone
Mrs. Tarpin	Sara Floyd
Man from Brooklyn	Harry M. Cooke
Molly Higee	Ruth Thane McDevitt
Jack Lamperson	John Parrish
The Man from Boston	Harold Grau
Photographers,	Edward Fisher, William Layton

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *October 1, 1941*

'Mr. Big' Starts Lyceum Season With a Comedy That Spills Over

"Mr. Big," comedy by Arthur Sheekman and Margaret Shane. Produced by George S. Kaufman at the Lyceum Theatre, New York, Sept. 30, 1941.

★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

ALL the King's Horses and All the King's Men had their limitations. After Humpty Dumpty's fall they were practically helpless. They couldn't get the old boy together again. Same thing has happened to George Kaufman and "Mr. Big" at the Lyceum.

Arthur Sheekman and Margaret Shane built a workable idea into what might have been an amusing twenty-five minute sketch. Mr. Kaufman took it over and tried to trick and stretch it into a two-hour comedy. No soap.

"Mr. Big" is a sprawling sort of entertainment that spills over from the stage into the aisles and blocks the exists. It seeks to avoid the audience's hair, but doesn't quite make it.

It winds up as a sort of "Hellzasputterin" item written and staged on the false theory that theatre audiences are happiest being exposed to themselves. "Cukoos on the Hearth" is a much worthier example of the same sort of thing.

Novel Start

There is novelty to brace the opening scenes of "Mr. Big." The curtain rises upon a line of bowing actors. They are a nondescript group and have just finished playing something or other.

The leading man steps nervously to the footlights to thank the audience for its support and is shot through the neck with a poisoned needle.

Is there a Doctor in the house? There is. Also a Police Commissioner, a District Attorney who is running for Governor, a variety of suspicious characters and a crew of comic union stagehands.

The Doctor pronounces the actor's death a murder. The Police Commissioner takes over, calls the District Attorney and the chase is on.

A comic chase part of the time, but pretty flat after the first half hour. An occasional bright bit of impertinence, but mostly the routine surprise and climax, with the actors doing their darndest to make you think you are having a most unusual experience in the theatre.

Luckiest actor in the cast is George Baxter. He is killed off first. All he has to do is to go from there to his dressing room, take off the greasepaint and go home—if he happens to be a homebody.

The others have to stay on answering foolish questions. Hume Cronyn, a good comedian with helpful material to work with, sputters around as the District Attorney who would take advantage of the situation to boost his political fortunes.

He is never very funny because all that he does has been obviously and laboriously built up for him.

Actors Unlucky

His comedy aids are similarly handicapped. The women folk are merely pushed in to give excuses for false clues. They had all had something to do with the dead actor, and a good deal of effort is spent on hinting variously as to what it was. Fay Wray, Betty Furness, Eleanor Phelps all do their best.

The audience has been ordered to keep its seats during the investigation. There are no intermissions, but two recesses are called, during one of which sandwiches are passed, and eaten, with some little show of suspicion. Yet the actor who passes them is willing to guarantee that they are genuine. Ham, baloney and cheese. That's the answer.

The spirit is one of satire that fizzes in place of snapping in the old Kaufman manner. Probably GSK had better follow the Brock Pemberton lead and get out the old bingo board. Donald Oenslager did the set.

"Mr. Big"

Reprinted from NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM", *October 1, 1941*

Mirth and Murder Have Finally Phfft

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

THE theater's latest bug, that of mixing murder with wackiness, continued last night at the Lyceum. It was a rather special occasion, with George S. Kaufman making his bow as a producer. But the theater's latest bug would seem to be as deadly as it is fascinating, and the list of its victims must now include Mr. Kaufman also. He went at his loony assignment with every twist and dodge you can think of, but he could only prove like others before that murder and farce, saving a miracle, must always be oil and water.

Mr. Big is a particular catastrophe, however, not just because it tries to marry off incompatibles, but even more because both parties to the match are extremely boring people. The murder end of the thing doesn't matter a lot because it never tries very hard —though that may be its mistake—for thrills and suspense. Nobody in the audience is given the least encouragement to shiver or scream or turn pale, there are a couple of corpses and a whole raft of suspects and that is that.

The crucial side of the play is its batty side, and for me it seemed about as authentically batty as a U. S. Army manual.

It didn't fail for lack of ideas. You could crowd most of *Hellzapoppin* into one corner of it. You could practically count on your fingers the people in the audience who weren't part of the show. During one intermission there was bingo, and during another sandwiches were served.

It didn't fail for lack of cavorting, either. The scene was a theater, and a big windbag of a district attorney who was running for governor was seated in a box, and as soon as the first murder occurred on stage, he came down and took over the investigation, halting it most of the time to make campaign speeches, call in the reporters, or get his picture taken. The show has, in other words, a full-sized character as well as all the hanky-panky and the poisoned darts.

But the whole thing gets nowhere because all the stunts seem forced, most of the script is impossible, and *Mr. Big* is a bore. Mr. Kaufman has slipped in (I would guess) the show's few bright gags, and some good directing touches.

Basically, however, it's not his kind of show. Its humor is low and broad and noisy, and Mr. Kaufman's isn't. Its insanity is pure slapstick, not the insanity of *You Can't Take It With You.*

Worst of all, I think Hume Cronyn is fatally miscast as Mr. Big. In Milquetoastish parts he has always been delightful, but in the reverse role of a pompous phony his exertions are palpable and his effects bammy. Ray Mayer, Betty Furness and Oscar Polk were good in smaller parts, and the rest of the cast tagged along.

Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, *October 1, 1941*

'Mr. Big,' by Arthur Sheekman and Margaret Shane, Is Produced by George S. Kaufman

By BROOKS ATKINSON

TO TAKE the long, philosophical point of view about this thing, "Mr. Big" cannot be as dull as it seems to be. It must be an optical illusion. A comedy by Arthur Sheekman and Margaret Shane, it was produced last evening at the Lyceum by George S. Kaufman, who, after all these years of jack-of-all-trades in the theatre, is making his debut as a producer. Last season "Mr. Big" was put on at Columbia as an experimental venture, and Lee Shubert and Mr. Kaufman collided violently while picking up the script. But that was a long time ago, and now "Mr. Big" is open for public inspection, and it is elaborately labored and commonplace.

* * *

Possibly "Hellzapoppin' has not been such an elevating influence on the stage as has been commonly supposed. There is a strain of "Hellzapoppin" in "Mr. Big's" bloodstream. When the curtain goes up some actors are taking their bows at the conclusion of an opening performance. Suddenly the star falls dead. Murdered, you can bet a taxpayer's last dollar. Since the district attorney, who is also a candidate for governor is present in the house, the criminal investigation begins at once on stage with the curtain up. And "Mr. Big" as a play proceeds to toss gags around at random, chase actors up and down the aisles, take pot-shots at politics and theatrical labor unions, distribute sandwiches in the audience, murder one more victim and solve the crime by proving the guilt of the most unsuspected character in the play.

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According to all intellectual precedents, all this ought to be dizzily uproarious. As a matter af fact, some of it is funny in passing. In the part of the disingenuous district attorney, Hume Cronyn, the bantam-size actor, is bland, slippery and stupid in a crisp and versatile performance. Betty Furness introduces tarnished insinuations in the dry style of Luella Gear; and Oscar Polk, the galumphing, innocent-voiced Negro comedian, shuffles some humorous lines into place. Le Roi Operti does some amusingly foolish things with the incidental part of an actor, and Mitzi is present in a bit part as a Broadway street vender. Every now and then Florenz Ames springs up from a seat in the audience to heckle the district attorney.

* * *

Although bits and gags are amusing here and there, the higgledy-piggledy organization of "Mr. Big" is against sustained enjoyment. And it is to be feared that all the theatrical ideas on which it is based are fundamentally moribund. When Mr. Kaufman stages a comedy that has been written by other hands, like "My Sister Eileen," this column invariably implies that Mr. Kaufman must have written some of the lines and invented some of the funniest business; and invariably Mr. Kaufman retorts that he never went near the place; so help him. The situation is puzzling. Could he have written some of the gags for "Mr. Big"? M-m-m. At any rate, his career as a producer should take a turn for the better whenever he produces another play.

"Mr. Big"

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *October 1, 1941*

Kaufman's Mr. Big Opens at the Lyceum

By JOHN MASON BROWN

WITH a cast more closely resembling a traffic jam than a company, no less a person than George S. Kaufman turned producer at the Lyceum last night by presenting a "whodunit." It's called Mr. Big and so combines Hellzapoppin with The Spider that each cancels the better features of the other.

It all begins amusingly enough. As the first curtain goes up several actors are "discovered" (to employ the guilty verb of the old stage directions) bowing to an applauding audience after a performance which has supposedly just been concluded.

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The star makes one of those breathy, grateful little speeches such as only leading men can release about the beautiful, clean, adult drama in which they believe. He is followed by a movie actress (Fay Wray to be exact) who chirps, as the cinema's elect will, about the happiness which is hers because of appearing once again before a real flesh-and-blood audience. And a district attorney, who is concluding a gubernatorial campaign which he trusts will lead eventually to the White House, is seated in a stage box.

Yes, with the bromides of the stage, the screen and politics being spoofed, however mildly, everything is amusing enough at the beginning. It is only after the first 15 minutes or so that one begins to realize how wise Arthur Sheekman and Margaret Shane were, as the authors of Mr. Big, to make their bid for applause at their play's start rather than at its finish.

Almost immediately their script commences to get out of hand. I don't mean the sudden death of the actor-manager, who drops to the floor, killed by a poison dart. Or the fact that the white-tied D. A. takes the case over. These developments are, of course, inevitable in this sort of concoction. I mean the long, long stretch which follows the discovery of the first murder and lasts to the final moments of its solution.

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It is during this interminable period that Mr. Big grows smaller and smaller. Indeed, Mr. Sheekman's and Miss Shane's melodrama grows so small, in spite of all its swarmings in the aisles and its noises offstage and on, that finally one could swear it is no more than a dramatization of the Law of Diminishing Returns.

This Bad Neighbor Policy of having the lady in front of you, or the gentleman behind you, suddenly turn out to be members of the cast is startlingly enough for a short while. But by the time you have spotted all the plants, and dodged the 10th witness or Equity policeman who had run past you in the darkness, all this theater-in-the-audience business can grow vastly tiresome. It is an old trick at best. Furthermore, it is one that does not get any younger after having been repeated for two hours.

The stage even now remains both the wisest and the necessary place for a play to be. Unfortunately not very much is occurring behind the footlights of the Lyceum these nights to indicate that a play is there. Only about three times during a fatiguing evening does Mr. Big release lines boasting the hoped-for "Kaufman touch." Most of the script's writing is as effortful as it is flat.

Nor does the direction benefit by Mr. Kaufman's customary fleetness. It, too, is more energetic than amusing. Although there must be almost enough actors on hand to establish an Equity quorum, the performances are as empty as is the writing. That excellent player, Hume Cronyn, is far too young and slight for the impossibly overdrawn D. A. Miss Wray is on the wooden side. And the others have scarcely enough time in which to say more than a hurried "good evening." I wish I could say as much.

Reprinted from NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *October 1, 1941*

A Murder or Two

By RICHARD WATTS, Jr.

SINCE this apparently is going to be a season devoted to mystery farces, it might seem that a murder comedy staged by George Kaufman and devoted to the spirit of "Hellzapoppin," would have a pretty fine head start toward popular success. This "Mr. Big" lets its actors roam up and down the aisles, enter the proceedings from the orchestra seats and boxes, hand out sandwiches to helpful members of the audience, and in various other ways goes in heavily for spectator participation. Yes, the "Hellzapoppin" influence is decidedly present. The Kaufman touch, however, is to be found only in brief and furtive moments, and "Mr. Big," a sprawling amalgamation of burlesque, political satire and a touch of melodrama, must be set down among the dreary events of the new theatre year.

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In their murder extravaganza, Arthur Sheekman and Margaret Shane have pondered the matter of what might conceivably take place if a gang-busting district attorney, who was running for the governorship, happened to be attending a first-night when a couple of killings took place on the stage. They do not like this district attorney, and they show him behaving like a fatuous idiot as he attempts to combine campaign oratory with mystery solving, and bungling both jobs with presumably comic completeness. In truth, they have disliked their central character so vigorously that they have deprived him of life, and he goes about his business, despite Hume Cronyn's bustling interpretation, a futile punching bag in a singularly futile play. Neither as satire nor as mystery play has "Mr. Big" any noticeable sign of merit, and the quips, which are astonishingly feeble, are as ineffectual as the murder case, which is third-rate.

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Ordinarily you can count on plays staged by Mr. Kaufman to possess a brisk gayety of invention and badinage and a high and deft expertness. That is the amazing thing about "Mr. Big." Even so commonplace a murder plot as the authors have devised might have been brought to life by a proper injection of the sort of wit and hilarity that provide the usual Kaufman touch. Here, however, the jokes are so feeble and the humorous malice so routine that there is not the slightest success in the play's effort to conceal the creaking of its narrative. At the end of the second act a second murder is committed, and the theory of the district attorney is that the slaying was done to prevent the victim from giving away the name of the murderer. My own guess is that the only reason for the killing was to keep the audience from thinking that the play was over at the close of that second act.

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One of the few pleasures of the evening is the presence in the cast of a favorite actor of mine, Oscar Polk, of "The Green Pastures" and "You Can't Take It With You," in the small role of the murdered man's servant he brings comic life to every scene in which he appears; a feat which lackadaisical Mr. Polk always achieves. There is a good performance, too, by Florens Ames, invariably an expert actor, as a dubious attorney who heckles Mr. Big from the audience. Miss Betty Furness, as a suspect, plays effectively, and Miss Fay Wray, of the films, is attractive as the heroine. The excellent Mr. Cronyn is handicapped by the clumsiness of his role, and is less helpful than usual, and Harry Gribbon, the ex-Keystone cop, who was the one hit of Molnar's "Delicate Story" last season, has little success as a half-witted police commissioner. "Mr. Big" would be a disappointment even if we had not come to expect more from Mr. Kaufman.

"Ghost for Sale"

Reprinted from NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *September 30, 1941*

Welcome Home

By RICHARD WATTS, Jr.

LESS than two weeks ago this wandering observer, no longer able to keep himself from the beguilements of the theater, fought his way impatiently through a Hongkong typhon and darted off for Broadway by the latest means of conveyance. In the speedy, ocean-spanning clipper he rushed through Manila, through Guam, through Wake and Midway Islands and, pausing for only a day in Honolulu, sped toward the mainland, fearful that he might miss some of the enchantments that the stage had in store for him. Even the fleshpots of Hollywood could not restrain him for long, for he knew that the theater was beckoning to him.

Late Monday night he caught a plane for New York and, through wind and rain and storm, flew impetuously eastward, dreaming of the beauties of the drama. Arriving just a few hours before curtain time, he hurried through bath and dinner and hied himself to the play, still breathless for the glories of the footlights. And then what he saw was "Ghost for Sale."

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This "Ghost for Sale" is one of those terribly facetious English mystery plays which do not make our British cousins any dearer to us. It is the type of work in which characters, who have just had their wits (what wits?) scared out of them at the end of one act, are always back there again for the next scene, just as gay and whimsical as ever, though not more so. It is something about an ancient castle in England (although for some reason one of the characters at one point speaks of going back to England), where there is some legend or other about a wronged husband who had walled his rival up near the library and has been cursed by his victim. Then there is a fellow who is trying to scare the owner of the castle into selling the place and later is terrified into selling it again. It is all told amid so many bad jokes, such dull drama and such fatuous writing that the whole thing becomes an affair of hideous boredom.

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A number of hitherto blameless actors and one or two not so blameless are immerced in these dull and foolish proceedings. Since none of them comes out of their collective plight with any particular cause for satisfaction, it might be just as well not to disturb them with individual comments. Instead, something should no doubt be said about the fact that this is, so far as I know, the first production of what is intended as a medium-priced resident stock company for Daly's Theatre in Sixty-third Street. The idea of stock companies and reduced prices for anxious theatre goers is an admirable one and deserves encouragement so long as the plays are worth doing in the first place. When, however, things like "Ghosts for Sale," with their grim larkishness, are feebly presented, the whole conception seems hardly worth bothering about. I think I'd rather be in Chungking.

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, *September 30, 1941*

"Ghost for Sale" Launches a New Stock Company at Daly's

By WILELLA WALDORF

ALEX COHEN, who operated the Red Barn at Locust Valley, L. I., this summer, moved into Daly's Theatre in 63d St. last night with what he hopes will become a New York stock company. Prices range from $1.65 down to 44 cents and the experiment will be tried for two weeks. If at the end of that time it seems worth while going on, Mr. Cohen will go on.

Like several other producers this season, he has selected for his first Broadway venture a comedy with a mystery in it, or perhaps it should be called a mystery with some comedy in it. "Ghost for Sale" was written by Ronald Jeans, who has done a number of things for the English stage, and it went on at London's Whitehall Theatre as far back as April, 1928.

In London A. E. Matthews and Evelyn Roberts played two brothers of the Tracey family, one bookish, one not so bookish. The bookish one has inherited the Hertfordshire manor house and the other, who has recently married a rich wife, wants to buy it. Although he is hard up and the upkeep of the baronial halls is beyond his means, the owner won't sell, so his brother invents a ghost to scare him out.

Mr. Jeans' play couldn't have been precisely brilliant even performed by a West End company, and it is very mild indeed as done by a stock company at Daly's 63rd St. Mr. Cohen has apparently made a determined effort to hire a troupe with at least a few authentic British accents, but it takes more than an accent to make an actor perfectly comfortable in Cleon Throckmorton's version of one of the stately homes of England.

Evan Thomas and Austin Fairman play the Tracey brothers at Daly's in the "What ho, old man, that's jolly sporting of you!" style Leon Janney and Ruth Gilbert make something of the adolescent love interest, and there are laughs here and there, but on the whole "Ghost for Sale" is a gentle British bore.

The London production, we understand, was given a certain distinction by the performances of several players through whom Mr. Jeans mildly kidded devotees of psychic phenomena. These roles are very poorly done at Daly's, and while we are in favor of a movement to lower theatre prices in New York, "Ghost for Sale" simply isn't good enough to compete in the Broadway play market.

At a summer theatre in July, perhaps. But in 63rd St. in September—almost October—no.

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *September 30, 1941*

Ghost for Sale Opens at Daly's Theater

By JOHN MASON BROWN

ALL things are relative, including the price of theater tickets. One dollar and sixty-five cents, you might say, is a modest sum for the best seats in a legitimate playhouse. At least it is by Broadway's swollen standards. Off-hand it would appear an admission charge calculated in these days to win a taxpayer's respectful gratitude.

But—here's the tragic catch—a dollar's worth is what a dollar buys. And last night at Daly's, even though I was enjoying the economy of press tickets, I felt myself hideously overcharged at Ghost for Sale. As to the anger of paying customers I can only guess.

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Ronald Jeans is an English dramatist, who even if he may not have written any masterpieces, has never been represented hereabout by quite so poor a play as the would-be thriller which last evening was acted just as badly as it deserved. Mr. Jeans' Lean Harvest was nothing to brag about. But Ghost for Sale is something to be ashamed of . . . for the theatre's sake no less than for Mr. Jeans.

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As far as New York First Nights go, it represents the acne rather than the acme of glamour. Not since the elevators at the Nora Bayes last lifted an audience skyward have local playgoers felt more sunk. "For Mr. Jeans' little frolic about a haunted English home, which changes hands several times during an interminable evening and then ends up not haunted at all, is one of the most inept bits of mumbo-jumbo to which I have ever been exposed. It is as tense as a siesta, as thrilling as tapioca and as laughable as an inquest.

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Lilia Motyleff's direction of these lame antics is, if anything, even lamer than Mr. Jeans' script, and the actors—Leon Janney, Austin Fairman, Elsie Mackie and the rest—offer no crutches.

An old story, doubtless apocryphal, used to insist that once when Heyward Broun had brought his large appetite into a restaurant, his single comment on the long menu was, "I see nothing to object to." At Daly's there is everything to object to. Although a ghost may be for sale there, I doubt if many customers will besiege the box office even at a $1.65 top. In the interests of prudence and entertainment, they should not.

"Ghost for Sale"

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, *September 30, 1941*

'Ghost for Sale,' Minor English Comedy, Opens at Daly's Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

LAST evening's "Ghost for Sale," which ushered in a stock company venture at Daly's Theater, is a comedy of the British Desultory Period and has to do with ghosts. The ghosts infest a stately library in Hertfordshire, where they fight a losing battle with whimseys and the timid young love which used, in easier days, to attract minor British playwrights rather inordinately.

Ronald Jeans is the minor British playwright who concocted "Ghost for Sale," which tried its slight wings in London a few seasons ago. He pictures a cheerfully vacuous family which owns a very old manor house and hasn't money to keep it up. Sir Gilbert wants to buy it from his brother, Martin, and when Martin is recalcitrant, Sir Gilbert resorts to stratagem. I suppose it will do no harm to report that the first ghost is merely a little number Sir Gilbert thought up, trying to scare Martin out. (The chicanery is, you must understand, all on a gentlemanly level.)

There are other ghostly stratagems to follow, at the rate of about a third of a stratagem to a scene. The blank spaces, which are numerous, are loosely packed with the hesitant love affair between Geoffrey and Judy, in which Judy is the aggressor and Geoffrey wears glasses. All very familiar, that is, and not terribly interesting. Geoffrey has other plans up his sleeve, however, and it is he in the end who is found lurking at the bottom of what mystery there is. The management would prefer you din't know more plot than that, and I'd just as soon not bother you with it anyway.

There is no real harm in this, but as the play is presented at Daly's there is a good deal of quiet boredom. There's an amusing scene toward the end, and a few agreeable little witticisms, but it is on the whole nothing to sit up for. A sharper performance than has been arranged would have helped, but probably not enough.

The players are for the most part capable enough. Evan Thomas, although he hops around a lot, is reasonably amusing as Martin and Austin Fairman is all right as Sir Gilbert. Leon Janney is sufficient to the part of Geoffrey and Ruth Gilbert is eagerly girlish as Judy. But the performance as a whole has no particular coherence and the rehearsal period was evidently too short. The two weeks which Alex Cohen, the producer, has allotted to "Ghost for Sale" will probably be time enough, and maybe time to spare.

'GHOST FOR SALE'

A comedy in three acts by Ronald Jeans; staged by Ilia Motyleff; setting by Cleon Throckmorton; presented at Daly's Theater by Alex Cohen on September 29, 1941, as the first in a series of stock company productions. The cast:

Martin Tracey	Evan Thomas
Pope	Jack Lynds
Eleanor Tracey	Mary Heberden
Geoffrey Tracey	Leon Janney
Sir Gilbert Tracey	Austin Fairman
Judy	Ruth Gilbert
Fluff (Lady Tracey)	Elsie Mackie
Pleasance Ambleton	Judy Blake
Basil Pennycook	Guy Tano
Hermione Proudfoot	Sara Fanelle
Mr. Blow	Martin Balsam
Mr. Whiteside	Ronald Alexander
Mr. Quale	Anthony Kent
Mr. Wilberforce	Steve Colton

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *September 30, 1941*

"Ghost for Sale" Can Be Bought for A Song at Daly's

"Ghost for Sale," comedy by Ronald Jeans. Produced by Alex Cohen at Daly's Theatre, New York, Sept. 29, 1941.

★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

THE experiment with the drama at Daly's Theatre, beginning last night with the production of an English comedy called "Ghost for Sale," is really Alex Cohen's continuation of his experiment last Summer with a stock company at the Red Barn theatre in Locust Valley.

He has an idea that drama can be sold on Broadway if the price is right. He is also smart enough to know, or so I assume, that the drama must be right, too. So he plans to experiment with several plays, old and new, until he finds one that will prove his contention. His price range is from 44 cents to $1.10.

"Ghost for Sale," written by Ronald Jeans, is rather on the discouraging side. It is one of those labored mystery plays that has to be directed with especial skill to be acted with any conviction, and without conviction it quickly falls apart. Directors appear to be Mr. Cohen's chief weakness as a producer.

Last night, though the audience was friendly and moderately responsive, when the ghost fell awkwardly out of the closet the cat fell out of the bag, but the audience remained ominously undisturbed in its seats.

The play has to do with certain property transfers in which one tricky relative tries to get rid of a haunted house to another, while a younger son is able to trick them all with the help of several husky would-be supernatural aids.

The company includes a half dozen competent players, and I suspect would do quite well with proper direction. There is a touch of the summer stock amateur here and there, but it is in no sense distressing.

The players of experience include Evan Thomas, Austin Fairman, who, when he was slimmer, played leads with the late Alice Brady; Leon Janney, one of the more engaging of the fluted juveniles; Ruth Gilbert, a pert soubrette with saucy tricks from the radio dramas, and Elsie Mackie, who fits neatly into the hopeful ingenue class.

Reprinted from
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
September 30, 1941

A Curse Is Laid On the Theater

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

A NEW stock company ran wild in 63d Street last night, and I gather it is all set to run wild again this evening. The particular work on which it exercised its lure is called *Ghost for Sale* and can be roughly described as a spook comedy. The only thing that scares you, however, is the acting. As for the comedy—well, one of the characters asks if a "commentator" hasn't something to do with an automobile, and another character is supposed to bring down the house by answering to the name of Barsterd.

The whole thing is laid in Hertfordshire, England, and deals with the attempt of an oblivious rotter to get hold of a house that its owner doesn't want to sell by "planting" a ghost in it. Once the ghost walks, the owner sells with pleasure; but of course the new owner finds he is in for more than he bargained for—other and more vengeful ghosts appear, a curse is found to be laid upon the house, and clocks start striking after being silent for 300 years. The program asks that no one "divulge what happens at the final curtain," a request I am glad to honor, as you wouldn't believe it anyhow.

The sandlot drama has seldom brought forth anything to vie with *Ghost for Sale*, and the cast worked like beavers to bring out every one of its innumerable bad points. They succeeded handsomely.

"Ghost for Sale"

Reprinted from NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN, *September 30, 1941*

'Ghost for Sale' Presented at Daly's

Historic Ruin in Hertfordshire Is Scene of New Play by Ronald Jeans

By JOHN ANDERSON

IN Ronald Jeans' new play, "Ghost for Sale," at Daly's last night, a mother said to her young daughter, "You should have played the siren," and the young daughter replied (after bracing herself slightly), "I didn't know he was fond of music."

Well, suh, you could have heard a face drop, but it was just the beginning. A little later another character remarked, "It was only the wind," and quicker than I could get to the street, Mr. Jeans had made Sir Gilbert add: "As the doctor said tapping an appendix."

These and other equally abused words make up the dialogue of the silliest play produced hereabouts in, well, in two weeks, and since that period includes both "The Distant City" and "The More the Merrier," it is, in its own way, quite a record. As a constructive critic of the drama I suggest that in some of the outgoing bundles for Britain they smuggle Mr. Jeans a couple of back copies of Punch.

When he is not writing such humorous lines, Mr. Jeans is explaining the events which took place one Spring at Tracey Manor, in Hertfordshire, an historic ruin, it seemed, as crumbling and cheerless and ivy-clad as the dialogue.

Martin Tracey simply couldn't keep it up, and yet didn't want to sell it to his brother Sir Gilbert Knight of the Bad Jokes, but kept prodding around in it for an alleged ghost, supposed to inhabit a cozy sliding panel in the library.

Sir Gilbert finally managed to buy it, some spook detective came and held a seance, and at the height of what was fondly hoped would prove the excitement of the second act, the panel opened, a figure fell out, with a piece of faded parchment in the pocket, and an ancient clock. There was some sort of curse on the parchment for the owner of Tracey Manor.

"Listen," cried one of the characters as the second act curtain time:: "It's going," and it was some little time before I realized she was talking about the clock and not the audience.

It is very easy to explain all the peculiar but uninteresting events of the play, and Mr. Jeans carefully does so, but the playbill begs me to keep the secret.

"Please . . ." it urges me, "in order that your friends may enjoy the play, do not divulge what happens at the final curtain."

This is a simple request, and I comply with it willingly. If my friends can be made happy by my keeping silent about the end, they may be even happier if we keep the whole thing a secret, and pretend, indeed, that it didn't happen.

It is acted in a morbid room which, in spite of its large window, is apparently so dark at noon that they put the lights on, and it is directed by Ilia Motrieff with the sort of yanking on and off technique in the movement of characters that suggested not the professional Broadway stage so much as the subway at rush hour.

Since I am a friend of good acting, the kindest thing, I think, that can be said about the performance is that it was indoors.

Reprinted from
NEW YORK TIMES
September 30, 1941

Stock Company Opens

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ABOUT three years after its London première, "Ghost for Sale" took up residence in the Sixty-third Street Theatre last evening as the first production of the Daly's Theatre Stock Company. A lot of bombs have fallen out of the sky since April 10, 1938. No one who knows London's taste in post-prandial diversion would dare believe that English audiences will never again tolerate this sort of fiddle-faddle. But Ronald Jeans's prank about spooks in a stately home of England does seem like something out of the dead past. It should have been left among the other museum relics of the ancient days of appeasement.

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The plot goes something like this: in an effort to trick his indigent brother into selling him the historical family mansion, Sir Gilbert Tracey populates it with counterfeit ghosts. But once he has acquired it, he is alarmed to discover that the ghosts may be genuine and he wants to get rid of it as soon as possible. Although this fable may seem to be tenuous enough as an excuse for playwriting, Mr. Jeans has taken pains to make it more tenuous still by turning it into a charade in the last scene. If English playgoers like this sort of thing, this column devoutly hopes that they will regard it as a polite chore rather than an adult entertainment.

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Daly's Theatre Stock Company at moderate prices is the enterprise of young Alex Cohen, who operated the Red Barn Theatre at Locust Valley last Summer. Against a setting by Cleon Throckmorton, his actors are giving a pretty scrambled impression of themselves. Leon Janney, who helps give the Parker Family the air from a broadcasting studio, is featured in the program. But little Ruth Gilbert is the only member of the cast who is giving a performance. She plays with lightness and spirit as if she were interested in what she is doing.

"The Distant City"

Reprinted from NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *September 23, 1941*

Dull Lower Depths

By HOWARD BARNES

THE new play at the Longacre, "The Distant City," finds the new season with its worst foot forward. As a matter of fact, it will take a lot of trying on the part of the stage to match the pretentious ineptitudes of this little folk melodrama. It broods fitfully on sex, sadism, strangling and seduction, presenting such choice characters as an ex-streetwalker, a dull-witted garbage collector, a hypocritical clergyman and a fellow who likes to watch fish eat each other up. One might arraign this Edwin B. Self opus on a question of good taste. It damns itself on any dramatic grounds.

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What the author had in mind is a bit puzzling. Having presented a group of supposedly earthy people in a garrulous first act, he switches abruptly to an equally garrulous consideration of the minister's menage. Just as you think there will never be an end to long speeches about nothing at all, the sadist knocks off the housemaid whom he had ruined, as the phrase once went, and pins the crime on the moronic garbage man. From that point on it is nip and tuck between dull talk and random melodramatic action, with the talk winning. Even the strangling left me cold.

If the play ever had a chance to come off, which is extremely doubtful, it was as a study of odd and contrasting characters. You first meet the aged hustler, perched on a tenement wall, where her son hung her to keep her out of his way. With Gladys George playing the role with her usual assurance, there is a whisp of a promise in this character, but it doesn't take any time at all to dispel it. The garbage collector, the poor servant girl, the preacher and his rich wife and even the sadistic strangler never assume any shape or individual personality. As a result "The Distant City" does not even have the few flashes of penetrating portraiture that ornament the worst theatrical offerings.

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As you may have guessed already, the play presents tough acting assignments. Miss George tries stubbornly to make the old harridan vital and believable. For most of the time, she is smothered in slipshod dialogue. At least, she does not have to appear in the disjointed second act. Ben Smith plays the half-wit son seriously, but with almost no conviction. Gertrude Flynn as the maid, Leonard Penn as the murderer and the other players just take direction. Since Edward Byron's staging is singularly unimaginative and ineffective, their excursions around the Longacre stage are nothing to cheer. "The Distant City" is all of a piece. It is all deplorable.

"The Distant City"

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, *September 23, 1941*

'The Distant City,' With Gladys George, Is Offered at the Longacre

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

BAD playwrighting counts as an occupational hazard in an actor's career and not even Equity can insure against it. But it is seldom that an actress of the skill of Miss Gladys George runs into anything quite so dire as a play called "The Distant City," which was written by Edwin B. Self and abstractedly produced last evening at the Longacre Theater by John Tuerk. Miss George almost seems to be the victim of a conspiracy.

In adversity she is gallant. She is more than gallant. Out of an incredible stencil, she produces—quite unaided by any of the other participants—a salty and appealing character. In the last act, placed in an essentially embarrassing position by Mr. Self, she manages to make several quite long passages authentically touching. She does this through the layers of grease paint which turns her into a woman of 70 and through layers of pathos which would smother almost anybody.

Miss George is made up to look 70 so that she can be the mother of an upright garbage collector who is in love with a pretty housemaid who has been seduced by the son of the family for which she works. The seducer, a dreadful fellow, who likes to torture fish, kills the girl and lays the blame on the righteous garbage man, who would go to the electric chair if his mother didn't pray for him in the warden's office. After her prayer, a key witness retracts a lie, so that's all right.

I do not like to drag any one further into the depths of Mr. Self's dramaturgy, but it may conceivably interest some to know that the garbage man is really the son of the clergyman for whom the maid works and that there are other coincidences too long armed to be endured. These things, together with little homilies, philosophic butlers and thoughtful prison guards who suddenly leap from their posts, bare their heads and report that it is a small world after all, protract "The Distant City." They do not make it any easier to account for.

Miss George shines in this naughty world, and shines almost alone. Ben Smith has moments of plausibility, but some of the others only make a bad matter worse. Leonard Penn's playing of villain, for example, is more abashing than you would care to imagine. Edward Byron has directed the play quite as badly as it deserves, and manages one or two errors which go even beyond Mr. Self's own accomplishments. Through all of this Miss George, although obviously trapped like a rabbit, plays honestly and touchingly and well.

Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, *September 23, 1941*

Gladys George Rushes Into Old Age in Leading Part of Edwin B. Self's 'The Distant City'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

WHILE "The Distant City" was dragging one foot after the other at the Longacre last evening, a reviewer could hardly help asking himself, "How did this one ever jump all the hazards and actually get on the stage?" Probably because it carries a message. Edwin B. Self, the author, seems to be trying to say that there is a God in heaven who answers honest pleas for justice. In the last scene, which is represented in the adjoining photograph, an old woman who was a slut in her youth asks God for justice and receives it in very short order.

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But the high-minded native of "The Distant City" is no compensation for the stupor of the writing or the mumbling incompetence of the performance. For Mr. Self, author also of "Two Strange Women" which was put on in 1933, has no apparent capacity for putting a play together in intelligible form. Although he begins with two pungent characters and an original, fabulous situation, he very quickly degenerates into maundering generalities calculated to bore an audience out of seven years' growth. If he does not make virtue odious, he makes it devilishly unpopular; and very few people in the opening night audience will have any use for virtue for quite a long time.

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Mr. Self is not responsible for all the dullness that settled down like a heavy pall at the Longacre last evening. Edward Byron, the director, must carry a heavy load of it. "The Distant City" is hardly directed at all. After playing blonde hussies for some time to general satisfaction, Gladys George has put on a white wig, daubed a few lines of age on a very radiant countenance, picked up a stick and passed herself off as 70 years of age. None of us was exactly fooled last evening. In the script the part may have looked like a fat one. For the old crone of Mr. Self's play is the ruin of a high-stepper with a heart of gold—a figure dearly loved by the adolescent theatre. But in the playing Mom Quigley, as the part is called, turns out to be a thin-voiced, weak-fibered, sentimental nuisance. Miss George is more fun when she is playing straight.

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In the part of a good-humored son Ben Smith gives an enjoyable and forthright performance that is a credit to the theatre where a person likes to hear what is said and see an actor move occasionally. Robert Vivian, the venerable, contributes a brief, amusing scene to the first act. Lee Baker and Morgan Farley play parsons blamelessly, and Gertrude Flynn brings a little straightforward spirit to the part of an expectant though unchurched mother. But that is about all the virtue this unstrung department can discover in Mr. Self's play about virtue. "The Distant City" is a long, long way from here.

'THE DISTANT CITY'

A play in three acts, by Edwin B. Self; staged by Edward Byron; settings by Samuel Leve; costumes by Helene Pons. Presented at the Longacre Theater on September 22, 1941, by John Tuerk. The cast:

Mom Quigley ..... Gladys George
Pete Quigley ..... Ben Smith
Edna Scott ..... Gertrude Flynn
David Hackett ..... Robert Vivian
Mrs. Beatrice Prentiss West ..... Merle Maddern
Rev. Jonas West ..... Lee Baker
Lester Prentiss ..... Leonard Penn
Mrs. Laura Prentiss ..... Louise Stanley
Sergeant McKiernan ..... Len Doyle
Policeman ..... Gilbert Morgan
Chaplain ..... Morgan Farley
Warden ..... Burke Clarke
Guard ..... Larry Hugo

Reprinted from
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
September 23, 1941

Distance Lends Disenchantment

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

METAPHORICALLY I have gritted my teeth at a good many plays, but last night I gritted them quite literally. There have been slightly more illiterate offerings than "The Distant City," and somewhat more tedious ones, but there has never been anything so distinctly repulsive. The classic bad taste of the man who reproduced the Venus de Milo with a clock in her belly was almost matched on a dozen occasions last night. Everything that vulgar archness and slobbering sentimentality could contrive between them somehow got itself written into the play. And the most painful thing about it was that the auhor, whose craftsmanship is as clumsy as his touch is offensive, seemed to be writing with a kind of monstrous sincerity.

The first act of The Distant City describes the gooey relationship between a high-spirited old sinner and her great 50-year-old booby of a son. Mom, at rise of curtain, is shown sitting in a chair nailed high up on the wall, which will indicate the sort of whimsy in which the play abounds; while Mom's sloppily coy—as well as spectacularly belated—confession to Pete that he is a bastard will indicate the play's charm.

The second act switches to a high-society milieu and with startling lack of plausibility shows Pete being framed for the murder of a pregnant servant girl who had appeared briefly in Act I.

All this, however, is but preparation for the third act. The act opens on the eve of Pete's electrocution, with Pete, Mom and the prison chaplain playing poker with what is meant to be heartbreaking gaiety. Then comes the moment of farewell; and after Pete refers to Mom as his fried chicken, everybody kneels down and Mom breaks into one of those "Listen, God" speeches that nothing can justify or pardon. But an even worse scene follows, between Mom and the Man Who Loved Her in Her Youth. (Don't ask me how he got there.) Then Mom's prayers are answered, and Pete is saved from the chair. Finally, the audience's prayers are answered also, and the curtain comes down.

The acting and directing were hardly better than the play. As Mom, Gladys George—playing a woman twice her age—showed a certain skill at times, but did nothing to subdue the shameless shamminess of her role. Ben Smith, as the son, seemed hopelessly sunk in his; and even so experienced an actor as Morgan Farley floundered painfully. The whole evening is something to forget about, if anybody can.

"The Distant City"

Reprinted from NEW YORK JOURNAL AND AMERICAN, *September 23, 1941*

'The Distant City' Opens at the Longacre

Gladys George Has Chief Role in Play That Focuses on a Mother and Son

By JOHN ANDERSON

MISS GLADYS GEORGE frolicked about in her makeup-box at the Longacre last night, put on the white hair and parchment skin of age, and almost withered away as a frail, but gusty antique who is the central character of Edwin B. Self's new play, "The Distant City," Her misfortune, I fear, is that the play withered away first leaving her, like a hitch-hiker on a detoured road, without a vehicle.

She is not only a snowy ancient but a cripple whose hips, it seems, were broken when a rowdy boy friend knocked her down stairs, long before sex rang its twilight curfew. The one thing on earth she loved was Pete, her son, a middle-aged illegitimate, a memento, so to speak, of her happier and more sinful days.

To keep her out of mischief he used to take her, chair and all, and hang her rather fondly, I assume, as you would a favorite picture, on the kitchen wall while he fussed around trying to make her a sponge cake. It would have been simpler, I think, if he had just cut her a slice of what might be called self-rising dialogue.

These peculiar events take place in a play whose second act is bereft of the chief character and seems to have almost no connection with the rest of it. As the most demountable piece of dramaturgy I have seen in a long time it might be played as a loose-leaf part of almost anything, including "Hellzapoppin" without making much more sense than it does on the stage of the Longacre.

It seems to be Mr. Self's reassuring doctrine that God is good and virtue, after suitably trying and worrisome difficulties, is triumphant. He shows us his strange pair, mother and son, dear and roughly tender to one another, mutually necessary and understanding, he shows us, I say, how their patient happiness is wrecked by a vile fellow who frames the son as a murderer.

Out of motives too complicated and far too silly to mention a rich and rancid young man put his own guilt on sonny for seducing the housemaid. The young man's lying mother says she saw the murder, accuses Pete, and the third act winds up in the prison where the hobbling old woman creaks to her insecure knees and asks God quietly to come to her help. She believes in the distant city, in the glory and goodness of divine right.

Sure enough, and with the almost indecent haste of the old-fashioned reprieve, the repenant Mrs. Poop rushes in, says she lied to save her own son and brings the curtain down on a clatter of pious hokum the like of which hasn't been heard in the land since William Jennings Bryan attacked Darwin and the monkeys at the Scopes trial. I didn't know where to look, except under my seat, for my hat.

The pity is that Mr. Self got himself and his audience hopelessly bogged down in a morass of soupy hooey, for while his first act was unsteady it did suggest that he might turn out some flavorsome and downright characters, full of salty talk, sharp opinions and simple human spunk. Some of the old gal's lines have a hard bitten edge to them, and the sting of caustic humor.

Pete's Candid Role

The part of Pete seemed written with an almost ferocious candor, until the plot reared its ugly head. I would not be so impious as to say that the faith of the characters seemed silly, but simply that the author appeared to be unable to communicate their faith to his audience, to make me believe either in them or their benefits.

Since his play hinges on that they seemed to be merely on a sentimental binge, awash with hokum and similar intoxicants.

While Miss George had some amusing moments in the first scene her performance throughout indicated that the character of the old woman was only grease-paint deep.

In the last act she seemed to have dropped even a few of her years. Ben Smith gives a simple and downright performance as Pete, with the force to make it sound honest in a phony play, and the others are hopelessly defeated by the script.

Samuel Leve, who designed such an admirable setting for "The Beautiful People," has housed the play in some rather inhospitable interiors, one inhumanly gaunt for the first act, and the other (for the miscellaneous second) too stilted for human living.

Since both were highly appropriate to the actual values of the play I suspect that he read the script, but shrewdly.

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, *September 23, 1941*

Gladys George in "The Distant City" at the Longacre Theatre

By WILELLA WALDORF

ACCORDING to expert information, most actors and actresses will leap at the chance to get themselves up as a crippled gaffer or a dear old grandma to totter around the stage pretending to be at least twice as old as they really are.

Fortunately, not many of them offen have the chance. For some reason or other, hitherto talented players, permitted white wigs and a cane, almost invariably lose all sense of proportion and are apt to make themselves up like something out of a mummy case, and shiver and twitch and cackle through an entire evening until the audience's nerves are wrecked. It must be said at once that Gladys George although she is apparently subject to the prevailing passion for white wigs, gives evidence of remarkable restraint in her impersonation of Mom Quigley, who is supposed to be just over seventy, but a spirited old party for her age.

At the Longacre Theatre, where "The Distant City" opened last night, Miss George doesn't look a day over seventy, and while she uses a cane on account of a broken hip (Mom's husband once playfully kicked her downstairs), she doesn't overdo it.

An Incredible Play

No, Miss George makes a nice enough old lady, if she must play old ladies, but the next time she feels moved to get herself up in a white wig, and employ a cane, it is devoutly to be hoped she will hesitate a little longer over the play.

It is almost impossible to believe that Miss George could have read "The Distant City" before she agreed to act in it, but we suppose she must at least have glanced at it. Perhaps it is simply that the star of "Personal Appearance," "Lady in Waiting," etc., wanted to do something a bit more serious for a change. They do say all comedians hope eventually to play "Hamlet." Well, the next time Miss George feels like playing "Hamlet," may she go ahead and play it!

"The Distant City" is so incredible that it is impossible to be sure it actually occurred. Sometimes it was bad enough to be funny, but most of the time it was merely bad.

"Little Stranger" Expected

Mom Quigley and her son, Pete, a garbage collector, live in a tumbledown shack and get along happily enough until Pete's girl, Edna, a maid at the Rev. West's home, turns up with the information that she is going to have what is referred to in "The Corn Is Green" as a "little stranger." She wants Pete to marry her, although he is not the father-to-be.

Change of scene to the Rev. West's, an amazing household. The Rev. obliges with a sermon, his wife acts like a moonstruck case in urgent need of a psychiatrist, and her son is a Cad, a Bounder and a Sadist. Need we add that he is also the father of Edna's coming child?

It was around this time that Mom recalls suddenly that Pete himself was an illegitimate baby. His father was a divinity student, now a preacher in this very city. (Could it be the Rev. West?)

Murder in the Greenhouse

Well, Edna is murdered offstage in the greenhouse, Pete is arrested on the evidence of the Rev. West's wife and step-son, and the last act goes on in the warden's office just before the execution. Miss George, who hadn't appeared in the second act at all, had her big chance in a nice chummy prayer to God, asking Him to spare her boy. The author then brings on his thesis that poor sinners are just as important in the sight of God as rich ones. The Distant City, of course, is heaven.

Miss George is loyally assisted by Ben Smith, who gives a good performance as big, blundering Pete, who can't tell brandy from "sacramental wine," and it was hard to see such players as Merle Maddern, Robert Vivian and Gertrude Glynn floundering around in this amazing brew.

Altogether, a new low for the season so far.

"The Distant City"

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *September 23, 1941*

Gladys George Appears in The Distant City

By JOHN MASON BROWN

TO other actors, overeager to indulge in make-believe, Gladys George's desire to appear in The Distant City may be understandable enough. Of course, I can't be positive about this. And for the future comfort I trust that I am wrong. But I suspect not.

The chance to bend the back, to tighten the voice, reach for a cane, gray the face, paint wrinkles under the eyes and run white paint through the hair has proved fatal to many a good-looking actress who cares about her trade. The fact that instead of being asked to be themselves, these same personable performers are invited to get themselves up as harridans whom they need never fear resembling, even with the worst of luck, 40 years hence only seems to make the whole phony temptation the more irresistible. So disguised, they persuade themselves that everyone will be forced to realize they are acting. And, what is more, having a very good time of it.

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At the Longacre last night a drama by Edwin B. Self was providing Miss George with precisely such a vacation from comeliness. If Miss George, Barkis-like, was willin', and chose to hide the bright light of her blonde hair under a bushel basket of grease paint, it was more than her make-up box which misled her.

In her direction, Mr. Self had tossed not a role but a Valentine. Did he ask her to be ugly? Yes, but he also asked her to be good. Not good in the Salvation Army sense. But good, nevertheless. Indeed, so good and noble and supposedly wise and colorful in her earthy way that Miss George could not say "No," even if it would have been better for all concerned if she had not said "Yes."

Miss George has her moments of "Lady-Come-to-See" fun playing Mom in Mr. Self's script. Helen Westley would have been better at these antics; saltier, more lusty and less like a bored little rich girl, with her pigtails showing, amusing herself by putting a scarf over her head and murmuring, "A penny, please; I'm a poor old beggar woman." But Miss George has her fun, even if she does not provide much.

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As Mr. Self sees her, Mom is quite a character. To quote him she is "a crippled bat." She is a bad woman of 70 with a heart of gold. Although her conversation shows that she has gone far beyond the bees and flowers, she has never lost her goodness. She is quite expert, too, at her own variety of prayers. Moreover, she has a lot to pray about. Indeed, she finally has to pray her illegitimate son, who is a garbage man, right out of the electric chair to which he has been unjustly sentenced in the place of a caddish rich boy who is good neither to girls nor fish.

Mom's story as told in The Distant City is very silly. If it is hard to take when Miss George is on hand, shyly attacking a bold part and timidly whispering her more vigorous speeches; it is even more difficult to take during the whole of the second act when she is offstage.

In fairness to Mr. Self, however, it does seem necessary to insist that bad as his play is (and with its sudden sermons, its splotches of poof Ibsen and its misplaced sincerity, it could not easily be worse), it was given one of the most impossible of productions last night. Edward Byron's direction was no help. And Lee Baker's forensics were a decided hindrance. Ben Smith, a good actor, did what he could. But the garbage man was too much for him, even as The Distant City was too much for most of us.

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *September 23, 1941*

"The Distant City," Tale of a Wayward Lady, a Loving Son

"The Distant City," drama by Edwin B. Self. Produced by John Tuerk at the Longacre Theatre, New Yok, Sept. 22, 1941.

★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

THE author of "The Distant City" at the Longacre is an advertising man with a passion for the drama. Edwin B. Self is the name. He used to be in rubber. Probably still is. Not that it matters.

His passion is still the drama. In the late nineteen-twenties he wrote one called "Junk." It wasn't quite as impossible as the drama's critics insisted, but it lasted for only nine performances.

Then, in 1933, he wrote one called "Two Strange Women." This showed some improvement, but not enough. It was played for fifteen performances.

Now he comes with "The Distant City," which is the most actable of the three, and, in a way, a reflection of both. It is punctuated with with much the same social philosophy as "Junk" and is about another of the strange women who seem curiously to people the author's fancy.

Strange Woman

The strange woman of "The Distant City" is Mom Quigley, 70-odd and something of an atheist. She lives in "a big city in the Middle West" and has a son, Pete, who is a member of the sanitary squad. He collects garbage.

Mom had been something of a gal in her youth, and Pete never knew his father. Neither did Mom—not very well.

And now Pete, with noble convictions but normal reactions, finds that the girl he has always loved is that way, too.

To save her honor, and perhaps her mind, he is willing to marry her. But before he can arrange this the minister's stepson who is responsible for the situation strangles the girl and puts the blame on Pete.

Being a garbage man and a little dumb, it apparently was easy to convict Pete on pretty flimsy circumstantial evidence. At any rate, we leave him on his way to the electric chair, or the gallows, just after Mom has been converted and is willing to accept God.

Good for Gladys

All the fundamentals of actable melodrama are mixed in with this arbitrary pattern, but Mr. Self's trouble seems to be in giving them a proper balance.

He devotes his first act to establishing Mom and then leaves her out of the picture while he crudely and unconvincingly gets Pete into trouble.

When he starts to re-establish Mom there isn't anything left to work with but an old unbeliever's prayer for her son.

The prayer gives Gladys George a chance to prove that she has learned her business, through observation as well as instinct, during the years she has been on the stage. But it isn't enough to pull Mr. Self's drama together.

Miss George is good in other scenes, too. She is something more than a young woman in a gray wig pretending to be half crippled. She has a proper poise, a good sense of the deliberation and calm acceptance of circumstances that go with old age, as well as the skill to project them.

Ben Smith again proves his sturdy quality at Pete, though naturally he is a bit more Southern than Middle Western, being Texas reared.

Supporting roles are carefully cast but mostly colorless. Lee Baker plays a minister a little confusedly. Morgan Farley another. Leonard Penn is properly dastardly as the seducer.

Merle Maddern is there, briefly. And Gertrude Flynn. And Len Doyle and Robert Vivian. And Louise Stanley. Nice settings by Samuel Leve. Mr. Self is at least a generous half-producer.